Imagine No Possessions: Divestment and the Social Bond in the work of Howard Fried, John D. Freyer, and Michael Landy

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ABSTRACT

Taylor A. Barrett: Imagine No Possessions: Divestment and the Social Bond in the work of Howard Fried, John D. Freyer, and Michael Landy
(Under the direction of Maggie Cao)

In 2014, Howard Fried inventoried his deceased mother's wardrobe in anticipation of exchanging its contents with a group of strangers. In 2001, John D. Freyer sold over all of his personal possessions on eBay and used these sales as the starting point for social exchanges with those who purchased his objects. Lastly, in 2001, Michael Landy employed twelve Operatives to destroy all 7,227 of his possessions in front of a live audience. In this thesis, I propose that mass divestment of personal possessions serves as the starting point for new object rituals and social bonds between these artists and their participants. Drawing on anthropological theory and material culture studies, and approaches borrowed from consumption studies, I first expose the alternative systems of consumption employed by each artist, ultimately arguing that Fried, Freyer, and Landy suggest a rethinking of the status of objects in consumer culture.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

"A key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard possessions as parts of ourselves. We are what we have and possess. This is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior."

- Richard Belk, "Are We What We Own?" 2000[1]

Are we truly what we possess? If the answer is, 'yes,' then what does it mean to get rid of what we own? It is the works of artists Howard Fried, John D. Freyer, and Michael Landy that provide a possible answer to this question. Through their participatory performative works, these artists rid themselves of their possessions while shedding light upon the relationship between the object and the social bond within a world structured by twenty-first-century capitalist consumerism. Fried, Freyer and Landy are unique amongst contemporary artists that use personal possessions as materials; their work reflects and responds to the overwhelming presence of consumerism in daily life and the duality of objects as both strong identity markers and meaningless consumer goods.[2] These artists draw upon vocabularies of consumerist culture, such as thrifting, online shopping, and mass-manufacturing processes, to create works that function within alternate spheres of consumption. Fried leverages the emotional power of the well-worn wardrobe of his deceased mother in combination with familiar possession rituals to force his participants into carrying on the memory of his mother in a material form. Freyer uses

[1] Richard Belk, "Are We What We Own?," in *I Shop, Therefore I Am : Compulsive Buying and the Search for Self* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 2000), 76.

[2] For more information about contemporary artists working with personal possessions as material, see footnote 37 in this introduction.

an e-commerce platform to make a small profit while also using the same platform to forge meaningful human connections. Landy destroys all of his worldly possessions, regardless of their value or meaning, as he tests the power of the object as a creator of social bonds. Fried, Freyer, and Landy act in opposition to typical consumerist behaviors in that they actively and purposefully divest themselves of large quantities of meaningful and valuable possessions. They do so through novel systems of their own making which are each dependent upon the direct participation of their audiences, and thus speak to human-object relationships *and* human-human relationships forged through objects. Through these works, each artist engages with the object as a conduit for social bonds while commenting upon elements of capitalist consumerism.

In his still-ongoing work begun in 2014, *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe*, Howard Fried created an iterative, interactive work involving the entirety of his late mother's wardrobe. *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe* involves online surveys that match articles of his mother's closet to the work's viewers-turned-participants; these items are for the participants to keep as long as they agree to participate in future iterations of the work. Fried creates a space in which customary consumption rituals are subtly modified, furnishing Fried with control over his participants' relationships to his mother's clothing. In 2001, John D. Freyer began *All My Life for Sale*, a work in which he set out to sell all of his possessions on the then-new website eBay.com. As he began to contemplate the history attached to his things, he became inspired to ask his objects' new owners if he could come visit them to see where his possessions ended up. *All My Life for Sale* builds upon existing modes of subversive consumerism as Freyer uses the sale of his possessions to create a space in which interpersonal connections are facilitated through objects. Lastly, in 2001, British artist Michael Landy systematically destroyed all of his possessions over a two-week period for his career-defining work *Break Down*. The

process involved a dozen assistants, a large custom industrial conveyor belt, and took place in the lobby of a former department store in London's busy downtown shopping district. Landy later buried the 5.75 tons of his granulated possessions in a landfill outside London. In destroying his life's possessions en masse, Landy questions and ultimately reveals the power of the material object in the creation of social bonds even despite their destruction.

Consumerism and Identity

Fried, Freyer, and Landy each use specific visual vocabularies of consumerism, make work that is dependent upon both traditional and alternative modes of consumption, and critique the power of capitalist consumerism in twenty-first-century life. Any analysis of their work is dependent upon the long history of consumerism, of which I will outline broadly in the beginning this section. Scholars trace the roots of modern consumerism back to Renaissance Europe, a period in which a societal, materialistic mentality was developed in tandem with the development of modern individualism.[3] The substantial and widespread social changes that took place during and after the second industrial revolution (c. 1870 - 1914) established a sturdy foundation for the contemporary twenty-first-century consumerism to which Fried, Freyer, and Landy's work respond. The second Industrial Revolution caused major upheaval within both societal relations and rituals, changing the ways in which people formed their identities and

[3] Scholars hold varying opinions concerning the true start date of consumerism. Chandra Mukerhji has claimed it began during the Renaissance, while Grant David McCracken cites Elizabethan England as the moment during which early practices of consumption paved the way for modern consumerism. Several English historians, amongst them Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and John Harold Plumb echo McCracken in identifying England as the birthplace of consumerist society but put the start date 200 years later during the eighteenth century. Instead of viewing these various start dates as incongruous, they should be treated as interdependent and used as evidence for the slow and steady rise of consumerism in the Western world. Regardless of its true start date, modern consumerism is dependent upon the significant and widespread social changes that occurring during and after the second industrial revolution. Gianpiero Vincenzo, *New Ritual Society: Consumerism and Culture in the Contemporary Era* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 8-24.

related to the world. Prior to the World Wars, individuals predominantly formed their identities through religion and family ties.[4] As industrialization expanded and impacted daily life, smaller communities built around shared faith and blood faded away. With the proliferation of commodity goods, material possessions began to take the places once held by religion and family in the process of identity formation. Religious beliefs were replaced by consumerist rituals as a means of structuring and ordering the world.[5] Whereas religious holidays and calendars were formerly used to mark days, seasons and years, consumerism usurped religion as an organizing mechanism in the modern world; in the US, cigarettes and coffee became mainstays of social interaction, while Christmas, the major consumption holiday, and other seasonal shopping periods grew to mark the passage of time.[6]

Post-War manufacturing in the United States dramatically altered the wide-spread availability of inexpensive, easy-to-obtain consumer goods. Mass consumption defined the twentieth century in the United states as advertising increased individuals' exposure to available material possessions, while also creating categories of goods which correlated with and often reinforced existing socio-cultural groups.[7] There was a tenfold increase in the number of new products introduced to the United States market every year between 1970 and 1999 .[8] In 1987, the United States was home to more shopping malls than high schools.[9] Over the last several

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[4] Cathrine V. Jansson-Boyd, *Consumption Matters: A Psychological Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 21.

[5] Jansson-Boyd, *Consumption Matters: A Psychological Perspective*, 21.

[6] Vincenzo, *New Ritual Society: Consumerism and Culture in the Contemporary Era*, 31.

[7] Lizabeth Cohen, "Citizens and Consumers in the United States in the Century of Mass Consumption," in *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, Leisure, Consumption, and Culture (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 203.

[8] Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 1.

[9] Lury, *Consumer Culture*, 2.

decades, there has been a significant proliferation of retail spaces, platforms and ways of consuming, including shopping malls, mail-order catalogues, pop-up shops, flea markets and Internet shopping platforms; today there are unprecedented and virtually unlimited ways to consume material goods. Advertisements abound, be they in print, on billboards, websites, television, or radio. It is estimated that a child in the early 2000s saw over 20,000 commercials each year.[10] Call them what you will, but products, objects, possessions, material goods, and things are virtually inescapable for the contemporary global citizen.

Objects are an integral part of identity formation for individuals within a culture of consumption. Business historian Russel Belk writes about the concept of possessions as extended self and the importance of that possession. The idea of 'possessions as extended self' concerns the relationships between individuals' self-conception, the consumer choices they make and, ultimately, the possessions with which they choose to surround themselves. This theory states that, consciously or subconsciously, deliberately or inadvertently, people in consumerist societies regard their possessions as parts of themselves.[11] Belk explains that through possessing things, the sense of self is supported and that the idea that "we are what we have is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior."[12] At all stages of life, from infancy through old age, possessions aid in individuals' formation of self, sense of control, feelings of continuity, maintaining a sense of the past and even in preparing for death.[13] Possessions help infants to distinguish themselves from their environments, aid the maintenance of self-identity during

[10] Lury, 2.

[11] Russell W. Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," *Journal of Consumer Research* 15, no. 2 (September 1, 1988): 139.

[12] Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," 139.

[13] Ibid.

challenging transitions, and create inter-generational feelings of continuity in which objects come to represent both people and entire families.[14] Thus, the loss of possessions can induce feelings of the loss of both self and others, *and* serve as comforting tokens with which the living remember the dead. The practice of burying the dead with their possessions has been dated to between 60,000 and 100,000 years ago leading anthropologists to conclude that the belief that possessions have the ability to communicate information about their owners has been present across cultures for centuries.[15] Belk asserts that individuals are not represented by one brand or object, but rather by the entirety of their amassed possessions. The person-thing relationship does not function in a vacuum, but rather is enmeshed within larger societal relationships. As value is culturally constructed, relationships with objects are inherently and always three-way, or as Belk explains, person-object-person.[16] The theory that the amassing and use of consumer possessions underpins both self and group identity complicates the role of the artists' personal possessions in the works of Fried, Freyer and Landy, and has crucial implications for the meaning of objects as they function within each work.

Methodology

As *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe* (fig. 1), *All My Life for Sale* (fig. 2), and *Break Down* (fig. 3) are each concerned with the relationship between people, objects, and their socio-cultural surroundings, I will employ anthropological theories when analyzing these works. Grant McCracken has addressed the role that culturally constructed object meaning plays

[14] Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," 144.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," 147.

in cultural rituals and it is his scholarship that will serve as my primary framework when assessing the works of Fried, Freyer, and Landy. These theories elucidate how the works of Fried, Freyer, and Landy engage with ideas about individual and personal relationships with objects, as well as the larger societal systems in which these artists are participating.

In the late 1980s McCracken expanded upon existing scholarship regarding person-object relationships, specifically commodity significance, by proposing a theoretical approach to the cultural meaning of consumer goods that incorporates their movement throughout a given society. I will use McCracken's work to frame the ways in which Fried, Freyer, and Landy respond to existing cultural meanings of consumer goods while also creating systems in which those meanings are transformed. McCracken theorized that meaning is constantly in transit and that cultural meaning "flows continuously between its several locations in the social world."[17] The cultural meaning of consumer goods exists in three locations: the culturally constituted world, the consumer good, and the individual consumer.[18] McCracken describes the culturally constituted world as the world of everyday experience in which culture is the lens through which individuals view and process phenomena. In essence, culture regulates how the world will be created by human effort and provides meaning for that world.[19]

McCracken additionally identified four types of consumption rituals involving objects and human beings, three of which are most crucial in relation to the works of Fried, Freyer and Landy: exchange rituals, possession rituals, and divestment rituals. McCracken summarizes these the function of these rituals as such:

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[17] Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 71.

[18] McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*, 81.

[19] McCracken, 72.

> … rituals are variously used to transfer the meaning contained in goods to individual consumers. Exchange rituals are used to direct goods charged with certain meaningful properties to individuals… the giver is inviting the receiver to partake of the properties possessed by the good. Possession rituals are undertaken by the owner of a good in order to establish access to its meaningful properties. These rituals are designed to accomplish the transfer properties of the good to the owner. … Finally, divestment rituals are used to empty the goods of meaning so that meaning-loss or meaning-contagion cannot take place.[20]

As I will argue in the body chapters of this paper, Fried, Freyer, and Landy alter the performance of the aforementioned rituals in order to influence the human-object connections forged by their works. In changing how possession rituals are enacted, these artists have the ability to change the ways in which their participants relate to the objects that make up these works.

To inform my study of the commodified personal object in contemporary art, I look to the field of material culture studies, in addition to anthropology, with a specific focus upon culture "as something created and lived through objects."[21] The term material culture brings to the fore how seemingly inanimate objects act on people and are acted upon by people, thus performing social functions, determining social relations and providing symbolic significance to human activity.[22] Viewing culture as something that is both created by and lived through objects allows for a better understanding of social structures and systems in addition to human activity and emotion.[23] Within the material culture of consumer societies, the relationship between individuals and mass-produced consumer objects stands as an example of the convergence of social structures and values, and individualized, personal behaviors. I assert that an analysis rooted in material culture provides a crucial framework for a discussion of Fried, Freyer and

[20] McCracken, 88.

[21] Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 4.

[22] Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*, 3.

[23] Woodward, 4.

Landy's use of personal objects as artistic materials. While it is possible to analyze these artworks in conceptual terms, understanding their components such as clothing, love letters, salt shakers, photographs, and even automobiles as material culture allows us to consider them as they relate to social networks and consumer culture.

The emotional bond that individuals share with objects is a central part of each of these artists work. As such, Louise Purbrick's concept of the emotion of material culture is a concept that is integral to a discussion of the emotions and memories individuals attach to personal objects.[24] Purbrick writes about the emotional layers involved within the process of gift exchange, explaining that considering material forms as repositories of affection, longing, and love requires a reframing of the position of objects in capitalist consumer culture. In a Marxist critique of capitalist consumerism, the commodity represents a state of alienation: a separation between an object's creation and its consumption. This separation obscures the human labor behind each material form and enables the marketplace to advertise false promises of self-fulfillment by the accumulation of consumer goods. To consider that, through the emotional elements of gift giving, a commodity can in fact provide feelings of fulfilment and positivity requires considering that the marketplace promises could be true.[25] Purbrick's object system schema begs the question: are objects in a capitalist consumer culture capable of transcending Marx's conception of commodity worlds or are they doomed to a permanent state of alienation? Through the works of Fried, Freyer, and Landy such issues are explored as the artists push the boundaries of object categorization and use.

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[24] Anna Moran and Sorcha O'Brien, eds., *Love Objects: Emotion, Design and Material Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 9.

[25] Louise Purbrick, "'I Love Giving Presents' The Emotion of Material Culture," in *Love Objects: Emotion, Design and Material Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 11.

Purbrick, building on the work of Theodore Adorno and Marcel Mauss, creates a division between 'commodity transactions' and gift exchange. Commodity exchanges are impersonal, finite, center around monetary value and lack the ability to foster human relationships.[26] Gift exchanges are centered around reciprocation, occur on slow, or possibly infinite, timelines and create bonds between giver and receiver as the cycle of reciprocal gifting repeats. Gift exchange produces feelings, sustains relationships between individuals, and sustain attachments between the living and the dead.[27] The gift acts as the antithesis of the commodity, with its lasting emotional affects endowing the act of gift giving with an inherent opposition to a commodity culture in which alienation is the norm.[28] While gift giving can be interpreted as an act of love, it can also be an act fraught with reciprocal implications which keep the giver and receiver in a state of endless exchange. If we assume Belk's argument to be true, that objects play a crucial role in both our self-identification and our conceptions of others, then acts of object exchange present within the works of Fried, Freyer, and Landy pose fruitful ground for new possibilities of human-object-human relationships.

Historical Precedents: The Commodity in Contemporary Art

Fried, Freyer, and Landy's work is not without artistic precedent. The work of these three artists rests upon on earlier Pop Art that questioned commodity transactions. The forerunners of this artistic movement set the foundation for the work of Fried, Freyer and Landy and the ways in which their work deals directly with popular culture. Just as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and London's Independent Group created a new movement in response to the post-WWII

[26] Moran, *Love Objects*, 13.

[27] Purbrick, "'I Love Giving Presents' The Emotion of Material Culture," 19.

[28] Ibid.

changes in consumption habits, so too are Fried, Freyer, and Landy responding to a new era of consumer society. These artists were driven to use the very biproducts of twenty-first-century consumerism – be they excess clothing, packaged food, or obsolete technological waste – as their materials, whereas Pop Art's artists used bold colors, repetition and the visual vocabularies of advertising, comic books, and mass media to allude to the larger-than-life presence of consumerism in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Despite the visual variances between the works of Fried, Freyer, and Landy, and the household-name Pop artists, the two groups of artists exhibit similarities in their need to comment upon and engage with the consumerist habits of their time.

Just as an understanding of Pop Art is central to a discussion of *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe*, *All My Life for Sale*, and *Break Down*, the history of art movements that critique consumerism is equally essential in this inquiry. Exchange is not exclusively a theme of anthropology; in depending on their audiences to generate meaning in his work, Fried and Freyer engage with a history of exchange-based practices in contemporary art. Toward the end of the twentieth century, a trend developed in contemporary art of artists giving things away and engaging with a type of exchange known as "critical exchange."[29] In Ben Kinmont's 1995 work *Exchange* (fig. 4), Kinmont invited people entering a retail store to choose any shirt they like and trade it for the shirt they wore into the store. Kinmont then ripped the store's label out of the new shirt and sew in a custom label featuring the name and date of the piece, in addition to the his own and the participant's signature. The tag and store label from the new shirt were then adhered to the participant's original shirt, entering back into the pool of possible choices for the next participant.

[29] Ted Purves, *What We Want Is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), ix.

The artist collective It Can Change began their ongoing work, 'The Clothing Project' in 2003. It Can Change solicited participants to create 'wearable works of art' collecting these unique items of clothing from over 50 individuals from around the world for display at the Kunsthalle Friedericianum in Kassell, Germany. Instead of giving the items to the gallery visitors, the collective brought them outside, giving them away throughout the city streets. Recipients of the 'wearable art' were instructed to "pass them on to the first person to show interested in [them]," thus creating a self-perpetuating system.[30] The project took place outside of the gallery environment and on an undermined time frame, centering around the creation of ad-hoc community and expansive definitions of 'art,' thus depending on individual systems of value instead of 'art world' systems of value.[31] Both of these critical exchange projects created space and community around more thoughtful exchange practices, while also exemplifying the human tendency to create meaning through objects. Through such projects, artist shifted their roles from singular creators to collaborative partners, engaging their audiences by involving them directly in generating and sustaining works of art.[32] This movement developed in response to the growing role of capital relations within social systems and the desire this fueled for "social systems that emphasize other priorities."[33]

Collaborative works that involve the participation of the audience members have the ability to blur the lines between creator (the artist) and consumer (the audience), changing the meaning of the work substantially. While objects are central to each of the artists' works, the

[30] Purves, *What We Want Is Free*, 113.

[31] Purves, 113.

[32] Purves, ix.

[33] Purves, ix.

social exchanges born from each piece become the works themselves. Thus, the works in question owe much to the linage of relational aesthetics and social practice. Relational aesthetics, or relational art, was a term coined in 1998 by curator and historian Nicholas Bourriaud to describe contemporary art works in which artist-generated social experiences *are* the artwork. Relational works tend to happen outside of traditional art settings, and explore social bonds, social exchanges, and featured social connections as actual material.[34] The collective actions present within the works of Fried, Freyer, and Landy, enables participants to create systems built around objects *and* people that, unlike such connections within a capitalist consumer system, prioritize the social and the human above the material.

The works of Fried, Freyer, and Landy may all involve participants, but this does not mean that they do so in identical ways. Art Historian Kaija Kaitavuori has identified a typology of participation in contemporary art which I will use to discuss the implications of participation throughout each chapter in this analysis. In this typology, participants can function as targets, users, material, or co-creator. When participants are targets, they are forced to react to a work. When participants are users, they are engaged in social and physical experiences by an art work. When participants are material, individuals take part in the creation of artworks in which they are either material or workforce. Lastly, when participants act as co-creations, collaboration and active participation on the part of individuals becomes central to the creation of a work. At its most fundamental level, participation allows for the establishment of artist-audience relationships. These relationships have been presented as politically emancipatory and revolutionary and can be indeed be collaborative and mutually beneficial.[35] Yet participatory

[34] Kaija Kaitavuori, *The Participator in Contemporary Art: Art and Social Relationships*, International Library of Modern and Contemporary Art (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 42.

[35] Claire Bishop, *Participation* (London: MIT Press, 2006), 7

works can also create situations in which power struggles, issues of control, and imbalances of agency occur. Guy Debord argued that participation in contemporary art has the ability to rehumanize a society numbed and broken by "the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production."[36] Fried, Freyer, and Landy all depend upon the participation of others in order to carry out their projects as they create new social networks that work against the repression of capitalist consumption.

Fried, Freyer, and Landy are not the only contemporary artists that use personal possessions as materials. Other artists also create works in which personal objects are used as stand-ins for their original owners, act as memorials for the deceased or displaced, and serve to represent both the specificity of a singular life while also gesturing towards larger socio-cultural phenomena shared by viewers, makers, and subjects alike.[37] While numerous artists employ the use of personal objects to build upon and engage with the feelings of intimacy generated by sharing space with objects, they lack a specific critical element shared by the works of Fried, Freyer, and Landy: the three artists in focus all work within a system of their own making that seeks to disrupt the traditional and expected order of capitalist consumerism and call attention to the systems of commodification that have come to be commonplace in twenty-first-century life. These three artists create new social bonds through their acts of divestment, and this is what

[36] Claire Bishop, *Participation*, 11.

[37] While too many to list here, several artists share thematic and visual similarities with Fried, Freyer and Landy: Ai WeiWei has worked with thousands of articles of clothing left behind by refugees evacuated from the Idomeni refugee camp in Northern Greece in his work *Laundromat* (2016). As part of this work, Ai carefully laundered, organized and displayed the cast-off clothing of refugees in an attempt to restore dignity to those marginalized and forgotten. Maria and Alex Kalman created *Sara Berman's Closet* (2017) using the wardrove of their late mother and grandmother, respectively. The work, at its core, is about family intimacy and the representation of a person's essence through their belongings after they have died. In 2005, Song Dong worked with his mother's possessions to make his piece entitled *Waste Not*. The work served as a commentary on a generation of Chinese citizens who came of age during the Cultural Revolution (1966-67) and was comprised of over 10,000 personal possessions stockpiled by the artist's mother over five decades. While these works use the possessions of others as material, they differ from the works of Fried, Freyer, and Landy in that they do not investigate the transitive properties of personal possessions as they enter into alternative systems of exchange.

makes them unique. Fried uses his deceased mother's clothing to set up a series of exchanges where original artwork is handed out for free to participants. Freyer utilized a consumerist platform, eBay, to build meaningful personal relationships yet still depended upon an e-commerce platform while turning a small profit while forging these connections. Landy wrestles with the idea that 'we are what we own' by destroying them all regardless of their actual worth. In the process, the emotional value of his objects is laid bare as they are carefully destroyed by a team of participants. Creating their own systems of consumption and ritual that create social bonds with their works' participants allow for these three artists to grapple with consumerism differently than other artists that use personal possessions as material.

This thesis is divided into three chapters, each dedicated to an artist and one of their works. Chapter one focuses upon Howard Fried and his work *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe* (2014). Fried creates an alternative system in which customary consumption rituals are subtly modified, furnishing Fried with control over his participants relationships to his mother's clothing. This work engages themes of identity, mourning, and remembrance, and the ways in which each element is related to clothing. The artist leverages and exploits the emotional power of the object, using familiar systems of consumption to seduce his participants into carrying on the memory of his mother in a material form.

Chapter two explores the work *All My Life for Sale* (2001) by John D. Freyer. Freyer sold all of his belongings on eBay and asked that he be allowed to visit his object's in their new homes. The artist uses an act of possession divestment as an attempt to create meaningful interpersonal connections, building upon existing modes of subversive consumerism as he uses the sale of his possessions to create a space in which interpersonal connections are facilitated through objects.

Chapter three looks at the seminal work of artist Michael Landy entitled *Break Down* (2001), a work in which Landy systematically destroyed all of his possessions over a two-week long period. Landy's work reveals just how much of his life is wrapped up in his possessions and lays bare the emotional currency of the object. *Break Down* reveals the systems by which society imparts value upon possessions, interrogates these systems and ultimately exposes the strength and fundamental power of objects as agents of social bonds. Rather than destroy his objects himself, Landy employs a team of 12 Operatives to do the physical labor of destroying his possessions which allows for others to quickly develop connections to his personal items. Even through their destruction, Landy's possessions create new opportunities for social bonds between the artist, his Operatives, and the work's audience.

CHAPTER 1: THE DECOMPOSITION OF MY MOTHER'S WARDROBE

In a small room behind a plexiglass wall hang the remains of Rose K. Fried on four chrome rolling racks. Within the jumble of colors and textures can be found a teal polyester overcoat, floral, checkered and polka dotted blouses, thick knit sweaters with fisherman's collars, a collection of off-white sturdy brassieres, and amongst the neutral round-toed shoes sits one pair of muted gray-blue fuzzy slippers. The racks of clothing tell the story of a women with a penchant for vibrant colors, loud patterns and synthetic fabric, and the son who held onto his mother's wardrobe for over a decade after her death. *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe* speaks broadly about how identity is built around commodity consumption, and it describes a culture in which relationships are dictated, conditioned, and ultimately controlled by material possessions.

When a person dies, what becomes of their possessions? Special or highly valuable possessions may be kept by family and friends, while others are sold at estate or yard sales, with the rest making their way into charity bins, thrift shops, or dumpsters. In the case of Rose K. Fried's death, her son, the artist Howard Fried, elected to take an entirely novel approach towards the disposal of her lingering wardrobe. The artist used his deceased mother's clothing as the basis for his still-ongoing project *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe,* a work in which he first displayed his mother's garments alongside a sign-up sheet at The Box gallery in Los Angeles, California (fig. 5 - 8). Fried will distribute each article of the wardrobe to a different individual from the sheet; I will refer to these individuals as Fried's 'participants.' Participants must then agree to a set of rules regarding the use and treatment of the garment in

order to receive it and participate in future iterations of the work. Once the articles of Fried's mother's wardrobe have been distributed to participants, they must wear them to a 'Celebratory Event' held in Los Angeles at which all participants will be present and wearing their Fried garment. After they have returned home from this event, Fried's participants must send the artist photos they have made using highly specific instructions. Participants will produce images that reveal elements of the wardrobe's new environments. Fried will then use these photographs as the material with which he will create the final iteration of *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe.*[38]

Howard Fried creates an alternative system in which customary consumption rituals are subtly modified, furnishing Fried with control over his participants' relationships to his mother's clothing. Fried attempts to control his participants in order to forge a bond between them and his late mother. To accomplish this aim, the artist leverages and exploits the emotional power of the object, using familiar systems of consumption to force his participants into carrying on the memory of his mother in a material form. I will begin with a short analysis of Fried's oeuvre, with a focus on the theme of control as it manifests in his various works. I will follow this with a discussion about the role that clothing plays in society at large and in the identity formation of individuals. Within this analysis, I will examine Fried's use of object rituals, and the structural purpose these actions play in the work. Fried uses object rituals to reproduce visual vocabularies and experiential practices of Western consumerism. It is through these rituals that he works to

[38] At present, *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe* remains incomplete. The work was first exhibited at Fried's gallery, The Box, in Los Angeles, California in 2014 (fig. 1). It was soon after part of the 2016 exhibit The Keeper, organized by the New Museum in Manhattan (fig. 8). When exhibited at the Box and the New Museum, the wardrobe was hung on metal rolling racks and had already been inventoried, numbered, and organized. A sign-up sheet for participation was present at The Box but was not part of the New Museum installation. A later iteration of the work, entitled *Reconciliation Studies*, was shown at Frieze New York in 2016. The *Reconciliation Studies* consist of images of the wardrobe, both on hangers and on models. The wardrobe itself was also on display at Frieze New York alongside the images or the garments.

test his ability to influence his participants' relationships to their possessions and to his late mother. Lastly, I will address the work's participants and the ways in which Fried primes them to form emotional connections to his mother's wardrobe, thus creating an opportunity to force his participants to make emotional connections to their newfound clothing.

Control Freak: Fried's Past Work

To those familiar with Fried's career, *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe* could seem out of step with the rest of his body of work. After earning his MFA from University of California, Davis, in 1970, American artist Fried established himself as a key player in the burgeoning genre of video art, often combining elements of performance and installation into his video practice. Fried's 2014 work is thematically in line with the artist's earlier creations. Fried's work reveals a persistent and critical fascination with systems and institutions of control, with many of his works addressing authority, incorporating complex rules into durational projects. The theme of control has been omnipresent in Fried's oeuvre and *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe* is no exception.

In Fried's past works, he has examined specific institutions such as the museum (*The Museum Reaction Piece*, 1978-86), the military (*Fuck You Purdue*, 1971), and more small-scale figures of authority such as golf instructors (*The Burghers of Fort Worth*, 1975). The artist has stated that he is interested in systems of value and the countless possibilities inherent to any one structure of control.[39] Fried has continually retuned to issues of control, decision making, group behavior, and predictability within his works.[40] In *Patternmaker* (1984), Fried explored the

[39] The Museum of Modern Art. "Projects: Video XXIII." Press Release, (January 4, 1979).

[40] Linda M. Montano, *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties: Sex, Food, Money/Fame, Ritual/Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 500

impact of both surveillance and group thinking on the behavior of gallery visitors by recording and then playing videos of visitors as they toured a gallery filled with chairs (fig. 9). Every day, the previous day's footage would be played outside the gallery and as the days went by visitors became embolden by the behavior of the preceding visitors, resulting in near-chaotic treatment of the chairs within the gallery. Most often, Fried's words have been durational, performative and have utilized the participation of audience members or unsuspecting individuals. These elements, in addition to the aforementioned themes, recur and play out within *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe*.

Preoccupied with social institutions, Fried uses *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe* to interrogate one of the strongest social institutions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: consumerism. Interestingly, the ways in which Fried has tended to work in both previous projects and in his most recent work mimic elements of the systems he seeks to critique. In the instance of *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe*, Fried's lack of interest in individual participant identity imitates how companies and brands think of consumers as members of identifiable groups rather than as unique individuals.[41] Part of the rules for the work stipulate that a participant may send a proxy in their place if they are unable to attend the Celebratory Event wearing their garment. Similarly, in his 1978-86 work *The Museum Reaction Piece*, Fried replaced the whole cast of participants with approximate stand-ins when the original individuals became unavailable.[42] Fried is more concerned with the psychosocial elements of the processes and social institutions that shape both society and individuals than he is with the actual

[41] Lury, 153.

[42] Suzanne Foley, *Space, Time, Sound: Conceptual Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, the 1970s* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1981), 71.

identities of his work's participants. Fried has spent his 50-year career examining the functionality of various systems of authority, mimicking them as a means of testing their limits. In light of Fried's thematic preoccupations, *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe* can be understood as a work through which Fried attempts to test the functionality, limits, and durability of consumerism's control over both individuals and society-at-large.[43]

The Cultural Currency of Clothing

What makes *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrob*e distinctive in Fried's career is its focus on clothing. Fried capitalizes on the layered cultural significance of clothing because it plays a substantial yet subtle role within everyday life. Material culture historian Jennifer Le Zotte explains, "clothing is perhaps the most intimate of publicly displayed commodities, the items physically closest to our flesh and most immediately associated with our bodies."[44] Fried builds upon existing cultural associations between identity and clothing yet alters the traditional processes and personal possession rituals that occur around *used* clothing. Possession rituals are one of several kinds of acts that fall under the umbrella term of object rituals and such practices are performed by individuals when they want to either lay claim to a new object or prepare to

[43] Despite Fried's previous works and documented preoccupation with control, institutions of authority, and social systems, *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe* has predominantly been written about in terms of its sentimentality. The work has been described as a thoughtful gesture made by a son about his mother and has also been exhibited with and discussed alongside other works that represent the theme of collecting. Sharon Mizota, "Review: Howard Fried's Set of Imperatives Play out Unexpectedly," Los Angeles Times, December 13, 2014. Alex Jovanovich, "New Museum: 'The Keeper,'" Artforum, July 2016.

[44] Jennifer Le Zotte, *From Goodwill to Grunge: A History of Secondhand Styles and Alternative Economies* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 8.

dispossess a material belonging. Individuals partake in various object-related rituals in order to transform and control the status of the commodities that enter and exit their lives.[45]

In the twentieth century, secondhand clothing held a distinct potential for "social symbolism," writes Le Zotte, in that there existed a persistent "popular belief in the almost mystical powers of transference from one clothing owner to another."[46] As the market of used goods expanded, knowledge about a garments former owner became harder to come by and the mysticism of secondhand garb faded from popularity.[47] Thus, used clothing is now purchased without access to a garment's history. When Fried's participants receive their article of clothing, they also accept its original context. Fried prevents his deceased mother's identity from being literally and symbolically scrubbed from the wardrobe. Fried utilizes the visual and tactile vocabularies derived from existing consumerist rituals in his attempt to push, entice and beguile his participants into blurring the boundaries between their conceptions of selfhood and his mother's wardrobe. In doing so, he explores whether or not he can control the ways in which the participants relate to his mother's wardrobe and, quite possibly, his mother herself.

The close bodily contact that clothing has with its wearer is largely what makes Fried's piece function successfully; clothing is far more intimate than most other personal possessions. Objects that have been in close physical contact with an individual's body can become indices of that person, meaning that they can come to represent or stand in for the physical person

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[45] Grant McCracken, "Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods," *Journal of Consumer Research* 13, no. 1 (1986): 79.

[46] Grant McCracken, "Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods," 79.

[47] Le Zotte, 8.

themselves.[48] Alfred Gell uses the term 'index' to describe an object merging "with people by virtue of the existence of social relations between persons and things, and persons *via* things."[49] Gell's concept of 'the index,' largely enables this person-object merging to occur. An index is a sign, possibly taking the form of an object, that can be used to draw conclusions or speculations about the existence, intentions or capacities of other things or persons.[50] Thus, in the context of Fried's piece, Fried's mother's clothing acts as an index of the late Rose K. Fried. Clothing, and other such indices, naturally retain traces of biological existence as the surfaces of the objects absorb the physical traces—blood, sweat, tears, urine, etc.—from the various activities in which they are caught up.[51] It is through these traces that objects establish their power, their mnemonic characteristics, and are able to assume their places within shifting socio-cultural networks that have the ability to outlast individuals after their deaths.[52]

This tension between clothing and its role in processes of individuation and unification is at play throughout Fried's work as he uses his mother's clothing to attract participants and ensure their prolonged involvement with his project. As individuals use clothing to form their identities and define groups they are a part of, the use of Fried's mother's clothing has specific implications. If people regard their possessions as extensions of themselves, what does it mean for Fried's participants to incorporate Fried's mother's former clothing into their conception of selfhood? By retaining elements of his mother's identity (even if by the work's title alone) as

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[48] Carl Knappett, "Photographs, Skeuomorphs and Marionettes: Some Thoughts on Mind, Agency and Object." *Journal of Material Culture* 7, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 105.

[49] Ibid., 12

[50] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency : An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press, 1998), 5.
[51] Knappett, "Photographs, Skeuomorphs and Marionettes: Some Thoughts on Mind, Agency and Object," 108

[52] Knappett, 110.

they travel through different phases of the project, Fried pushes the boundaries of identity formation that are typically seen with personal possessions.

The identity boundaries that Fried is manipulating occur between his participants and the idea of his deceased mother as she is represented by her wardrobe. Used clothing is usually cleaned and presented in a manner that removes traces of an item's original owner. This way, an article of clothing's new owner is free to use the clothing to form their identities as they see fit, without the baggage of its past. As Fried prevents this customary process from occurring, he forces his participants to absorb their idea of his mother – regardless of its accuracy – into their self-conception. I argue that in doing so, Fried mimics the ways in which consumer culture controls how individuals envision and construct themselves.

The most intriguing element of *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe* is that Fried requires his participants enact object rituals with the possessions of his late mother, and not their own possessions. This feature adds a layer of complication to each phase of the project and is one that will be central to understanding the implications of the work. When all of Fried's participants are assembled – wearing their Fried item – at the Celebratory Event they are doing two things: they are creating a group identity structured around the wardrobe of the late Ms. Fried, and they are collectively agreeing that Rose K. Fried's clothing is in some way valuable. The participants are also performing a possession ritual that takes the form of display. In publicly displaying and showing off their new clothing, they are both claiming the wardrobe *and* its history as their own. Here, it is crucial that Fried is orchestrating these rituals; object rituals are used by individuals to retain control over their lived experiences as they are mediated through objects. By dictating how his participants relate to their objects, Fried is exerting control over how they relate to themselves. These acts work to conflate the participants identities and the

idea of Rose K. Fried, creating an environment in which the late Ms. Fried's identity is valued, preserved, and dispersed.

In the fourth phase of *Decomposition*, once the Celebratory Event has occurred, participants will take and send photos to Fried at his request. Taking photographs of one's items is another possession ritual that individuals enact in order to lay claim to the objects in their lives and incorporate them into their sense of self. The participant-generated photos will not be of the participants nor the garments but rather will depict the environments surrounding the garments in their new homes. Image instructions are highly specific, with examples including: "take a picture out of a window in a room adjacent to the room where the garment is usually kept," or "take a picture from the farthest intersection bordering the block with the building the garment is kept in while aiming the camera toward the approximate location of the garment," or "take a picture of your least favorite piece of furniture in the room farthest from the garment."[53] As individuals also use domestic spaces to assert and define their identities, this process further enmeshes the participants' identities and their new Fried garments.

Fried is able to control the ways in which his participants relate to and incorporate his mother's wardrobe into their identities because they are already culturally primed to associate clothing with its owner. While individuals typically use object rituals to create a sense of control over their possessions, Fried carefully dictates these rituals which results in Fried having control over his participants experiences of their new objects. Fried prevents usual possession rituals from occurring with his mother's wardrobe which alters the ways in which his participants relate to his deceased mother; he prevents divestment rituals from being performed and modifies

[53] The BOX Gallery, "Howard Fried: Sociopath, 1993, The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe, 2014-2015." 2014.

enacted possession rituals. Divestment rituals usually allow a consumer to avoid contact with the meaningful properties given to an object by a previous owner, and possession rituals allow for them establish a unique connection to new items.[54] Yet, in *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe*, divestment rituals are not occurring at all. While original meaning (as in how these objects were important to the late Ms. Fried) may not play a large role in the piece, the sentimental value of the wardrobe for Fried is preserved and is largely why the work is both appealing to its participants and is ultimately successful. People define themselves and others through the possessions they own, so Fried and participants, likely associate the wardrobe with Ms. Fried and begin to identify with elements of her perceived identity through her clothing.

Participation and Exchange

Yet another way that Fried asserts control over the degree to which his participants must incorporate his mother's wardrobe into their identities is through the act of exchange. Exchange rituals are yet another object ritual through which individuals and groups ascribe agreed upon value to objects. In most exchange ritual involving consumer goods, there is a cultural meaning attached to the good that the giver seeks to see transmitted to the receiver. Through exchanging his mother's wardrobe for his participants time, presence, and actions, Fried blurs the boundary between his mother and his works participants. In this section, I will focus on the work's participants and the significance of their involvement in *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe*. Not only do Fried's participants' identities begin to merge with his mother's wardrobe, but his participants themselves begin to function more as materials than they do as autonomous individuals. Thus, Fried imitates the way in which individuals become passive,

[54] McCracken, "Culture and Consumption," 80.

almost compulsive participants within capitalist consumer systems by using his participants as material rather than as collaborative individuals capable of making autonomous contributions to his work. In this way, and through the acts of exchange he initiates with his participants, Fried further exerts control over the actions, experiences, and identities of the individuals involved in *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe*. My analysis of Fried's participants and their actions incorporates anthropological theories of exchange as they relate to value and identity, and the ways in which this allows Fried to exert control over both his participants' identity formations and their relationships to their new-found possessions.

Acts of exchange have long been studied by anthropologists and can be used to make inferences about the ways in which cultures or sub-groups create, assign and maintain the value of the possessions that circulate between members. I argue that *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe* is made possible through a series of exchanges between Fried and the work's participants, which allow for processes through which the meaning of Fried's mother's wardrobe changes as it moves through various stages of recontextualization. In employing practices of exchange and commerce with objects closely associated with the personal and sentimental experience of loss, Fried is redefining what it could mean to memorialize and mourn the loss of his late mother while also testing the limits of his participants by requiring them to partake in subtly novel relationships with possessions. As exchange necessarily creates value and meaning for the objects involved, through *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe* Fried is attempting to create a collective space in which his mother becomes valuable and meaningful to others by employing acts of exchange. Fried establishes a value system in which his dead mother's wardrobe is placed on the same level as his participants, their time, and

elements of their privacy (through the photos of their homes gathered in phase 4) through their contractual commitment to the project.

Fried fosters an environment where his deceased mother's clothing becomes desirable and capable of fueling a series of exchanges between artist and audience that constitute a core aspect of the work. Fried's work does require the artist to "provide the initial collectability and worth to support the idea of the piece."[55] In creating this aura of value surrounding his mother's clothing, Fried is temporarily commoditizing the wardrobe by bringing it into a space reserved not only for the exhibition of art, but also for its eventual sale.[56] The clothing, once entered into the wardrobe of the late Mrs. Fried, assumed a kind of dormant commodity status which was reactivated in a new context upon its installation in the gallery. Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff argues that the same object may be considered a commodity at one point and not at another, while also being treated as a commodity by one individual and as non-commodity or, "something else" by the next.[57] Through its installation in an art gallery, the clothing assumes a commodity status and continues to be framed as a commodity through Fried's use of a visual vocabulary belonging to virtual commerce in the presentation of online shopping-style images.

Fried's use of several familiar consumer visual vocabularies, including thrift shopping and e-commerce, function to establish a sense of familiarity for his participants within the space the work. This ultimately works to his advantage as it makes his participants easier to manipulate. Fried uses the staged online-shopping style images of his mother's wardrobe to set

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[55] Ted Purves and Shane Aslan Selzer, *What We Want Is Free : Critical Exchanges in Recent Art*. Second Edition (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 4.

[56] A more fitting term may be re-commoditizing, as Fried's mother's clothing did once start out as common commodity objects when they were purchased with the intent of being worn.

[57] Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodification as Process," In *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64.

up his participants to unknowingly engage in familiar consumer behavior: online shopping. After Fried's participants fill out a short survey regarding their color preferences and other semi-personal information, they will digitally receive a set of photographs of the artist's mother's wardrobe from which to choose one item. This item will become theirs permanently. In adding this touch of personalization in digital format, Fried is invoking the experience and landscape of online retail with which most, if not all, of his participants are highly familiar. Doing so combines elements of second-hand shopping with digital commerce as to make his dead mother's used wardrobe accessible, familiar and consumable for his participants.[58]

Fried's participants cede control to the artist by signing a contract agreeing to all future phases of the project. As Fried's participants have little agency in his work, they fall into what Kaitavuori has coined as 'participants as material.' Within this category, participants consent to being used as an artist's materials, ceding part of their decision making power, agency and control to the artist.[59] This is critical as by utilizing his participants as a material rather than co-creators, users, or targets (the three other groups in Kaitavuori's typology), Fried mimics the way in which individuals become passive participants within capitalist consumer systems. By the fourth and final phase of *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe* Howard Fried will have

[58] The Internet is one of several communication technologies that have developed rapidly over the last 80+ year, allowing for consumerism to spread swiftly, taking new shapes and targeting different audiences, while also enabling companies to track the habits of and collect about data consumers. The spread of online consumerism has had direct influence on a large swath of practices, places and people, especially in terms of identity construction and definition. As users of various online identity influencers, be they chatrooms, news sources, clubs, blogs, or retail destinations, Fried's participants are primed to approach online shopping with acceptance and easily derive or strengthen facets of their identities through goods acquired online.
This digital element of the work is essential for the success of *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe* as it imbues the plainly used clothing of Fried's mother with a temporary and reversible air of anonymity, thus enabling the work's participants to engage with the wardrobe. Robert Rattle, "Imagining Identity in the Age of Internet and Communication Technologies," in *Consumer Culture, Modernity and Identity* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2016), 122 – 141.

[59] Kaitavuori, *The Participator in Contemporary Art: Art and Social Relationships*, 52.

potentially exerted a significant amount of control over 294 individuals. This feat could only be accomplished through a careful pantomime and modification of existing and rooted consumption practices in a culture in which the object holds great power and significance. In divesting himself of his deceased mother's wardrobe, Fried is able to let go of her remaining possessions without accepting the erasure of their connection to his mother's life and identity. Instead, Fried creates an alternative system in which customary consumption rituals are subtly tailored, which enables Fried to control his participants developing relationships to his mother's clothing. The artist depends upon the emotional and cultural significance of clothing in addition to using familiar systems of consumption to seduce his participants into carrying on the memory of his mother in a material form. As Fried's work is still-ongoing and not yet complete, it is impossible to measure whether the artist is truly successful in his attempt to control his participants. It may be that Fried is set up for success due to the fact that his participants are likely unconscious of the controlling nature of both his piece and of consumerism as a whole. In contrast to Fried, John D. Freyer, whose work we examine in the next chapter, affords his participants considerable agency within his work *All My Life for Sale*, which has an impact on how willing his participants are to fold his object's histories into their lives. In the next chapter, I will focus on another artwork in which one individual's possessions are dispersed, one that lacks the controlling nature of Fried's most recent work.

CHAPTER 2: All My Life for Sale

A set of false front teeth, wool socks, a tin of canned ham, a packet of paper cocktail parasols, a pair of blue converse sneakers. A 4lb bag of sugar, Star Wars bed sheets, five unprocessed rolls of 120 film, a Jesus Christ night-light. Men's button-down shirts, a phonebook, an ashtray, a copy of *Franny & Zooey* by J.D. Salinger. In August of 2000 John D. Freyer returned to Iowa City after a summer in New York City feeling burdened by the seemingly endless number of personal possessions that filled his small apartment. Over the year that he had spent in Iowa City, Freyer had accumulated things from garage sales and street curbs, often taking in unwanted items from friends. Freyer realized that his possessions were preventing him from being able to leave Iowa City with ease but wondered how he could manage to quickly rid himself of all he had accumulated.[60] Freyer also wondered, "what happens to me when I no longer have the things that supposedly define me."[61]

Divesting ourselves of our possessions typically involves making decisions like toss, donate, sell, or giveaway. Each of these options correlate to the meaning, sentimentality, or the monetary value of the possessions in question, and thus each choice reveals something about the human-object relationship. While Freyer opted for selling his possessions, the driving force behind this choice hardly seems to be monetary gain.[62] Instead, Freyer used eBay in his act of

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[60] John D. Freyer, *All My Life for Sale* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), vii.

[61] A. S. Berman, "Everything must Go Online Iowa Man Inventories all His Stuff to Sell it Off: [FINAL Edition]," (*USA Today,* Mar 08, 2001).

[62] The average cost of Freyer's possessions was approximately $8.00 each. Freyer made a total of $4,906.52 over the course of his project. Freyer, *All My Life for Sale*.

possession divestment as an attempt to create meaningful social bonds and community. I argue that Freyer builds upon existing modes of subversive consumerism as he uses the sale of his possessions to create a space in which interpersonal connections are facilitated through objects. *All My Life for Sale* offers the potential for new and adapted cultural rituals and practices built around objects and a human-centered approach to commodity good exchange.[63]

When deciding how to materially divest, Freyer guessed that most of his friends and neighbors would have no use for his things, so he looked to the fairly new online commerce site eBay.com. The dot-com boom was just coming to an end and everyone from Freyer's college days was making money "hand over fist" doing basic web design, young people were making millions in online business ventures and just about everything was "going dot-com."[64] Deciding he wanted his own dot-com to catalog the items he was selling, Freyer sat down at his computer to search a domain-registry service for an available website title. He typed in a handful of titles; garagesale.com, yardsale.com, housesale.com, junkyard.com, allforsale.com but all were taken. Freyer finally typed, 'allmylifeforsale' and 'available' flashed upon his screen. Frantically, Freyer registered the first available domain name and quickly realized its implications; Freyer would have to sell *all* of his possessions, as the domain name implied. [65]

Freyer went from selling a few items a week on eBay to figuring out the logistics of selling *all* of his possessions. Not knowing where or how to start, he called upon both friends and total strangers, inviting them to his house in October of 2000 for what he called an 'inventory

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[63] The press Freyer received for *All My Life for Sale* largely restated information from the introduction of Freyer's book about the project. No scholarly research has been done on the work to date.

[64] Freyer, *All My Life for Sale*, viii.

[65] Freyer, viii.

party.' From its inception, *All My Life for Sale* depended upon and helped to form community amongst Freyer, his friends, strangers, and objects alike. The partygoers were furnished with clipboards, white tags, and no limitations on what they could tag for sale as long as it was 'representative' of Freyer's life in Iowa City.[66] By the party's end, over six hundred possessions had been tagged. Freyer wrote that as he systematically photographed each of his objects, "I reflected on the role that it played in my life and the stories that almost ever object made me remember if I spent just a little bit of time with it."[67] As he became submerged in the objects' stories and the memories that lived within their materials, he wondered what would happen to these memories when he no longer owned these items. Would their new owners care? Soon after he started selling the 600-odd objects on eBay, Freyer began messaging the highest bidders asking them if they would mind sending him an update about his possessions in their new homes. While this caused some bidders to withdraw, it piqued the interest of many and soon Freyer was receiving dozens of updates from the new owners of his stuff.[68]

Buyers would send stories and photographs with their updates, all of which Freyer added to allmylifeforsale.com. A community began to grow from Freyer's eBay site, and around this time he received his first invitation to physically visit one of his former possessions, a saltshaker, in Portland, Maine. Freyer began contacting the other highest bidders, explaining his plan to visit his former objects when the sale period was over. Within a week he received forty invitations. By the end of this first phase, Freyer had received over 100 invitations from around the world. Starting on August 1, 2001, Freyer began a cross-country road trip to visit his old

[66] Freyer finished the project with some clothing, a laptop, and his car. Freyer, *All My Life for Sale*, ix.

[67] Freyer, ix.

[68] Freyer, *All My Life for Sale.*

possessions. By the end of his year and a half-long project Freyer had sold over 600 items, made $4,906.52 in eBay sales, and visited many of the hundreds of items that once filled his Iowa City Apartment.

In a capitalist consumer society, goods are typically used to build both an individual's sense of self and forge ties between groups that practice similar consumption habits.[69] The things we purchase not only help us to communicate who we are to the world, but also act as objects of cultural practice, whereby consumer goods represent and manifest a kind of social communication and contract.[70] These processes are made possible by consumption rituals that allow for mostly mass-produced objects to come to represent specific, singular elements about our identities; these rituals frequently combine advertised values or qualities with personal, object-associated memories and ideas. What then, does Freyer's sale of his used objects to strangers *and* asking for a sustained relationship with both these objects and their new owners reveal about the ways in which *All My Life for Sale* challenges expected human-object relationships for the work's participants (Freyer included)?

Yard Sales, eBay, and the Politics of Thrift

All My Life for Sale responds to and engages with a long and complex history of second-hand markets. Freyer builds upon and then expands the subversive elements of the yard sale and the identity-based practices of eBay. Yard sales and eBay both serve as alternative and at times defiant models for commerce that circumvent mainstream consumption markets which prioritize profit and a constant stream of new, must-have items. These alternative consumption models permit and facilitate social networks and community in ways that mainstream commerce

[69] Jansson-Boyd, *Consumption Matters*, 26.

[70] Ibid.

does not. The people-first politics of the yard sale combined with the primacy of object history prioritized by eBay can be seen at play throughout *All My Life for Sale*.

When yard sales began in the U.S. during the 1950s, they rapidly became sites in which consumers fostered community through objects.[71] Traditional capitalist consumption was, in fact, quite isolating; shopping malls were structured around commodities and transactions, whereas yard sales were centered around neighborhoods and people.[72] Yard sales circumvented the dominant consumer marketplace thus disrupting the narrative of suburban conformity, acting as a kind of "consumer rebellion" through which transformations in the relationships between material goods, individual consumers, and the act of shopping itself were signified.[73] Thrifting or buying second hand was thus a political act; it allowed for individuals and communities to wield their purchasing power as they refused the structure of mainstream commerce and consumption. Yard sales had a social importance that was absent in regular marketplace shopping experiences – they were people centered. Freyer is thus building upon this history and continuing the tradition of selling items in a manner that prioritizes community creation and uses objects as vehicles for meaningful interpersonal connection.

With the advent of the internet, much about the world changed including how and where people purchased their possessions. In 1995, six years prior to Freyer's project, eBay was designed and released as a free auction website (then called 'AuctionWeb'). eBay quickly transformed into an international economic, cultural, and social phenomenon, becoming a virtual

[71] Le Zotte, 93.

[72] Suburban shopping malls lacked the community-driven services and bustling locals of urban shopping centers. Whereas urban shopping centers were flanked by restaurants, hotels, courthouses and post offices, suburban shopping centers were often geographically isolated, requiring shoppers to drive distances from their homes and communities. Le Zotte, *From Goodwill to Grunge*, 102.

[73] Le Zotte, 92- 96.

space in which capital, material aspiration, and identity coincided.[74] The basics of eBay are rather simple: individuals photograph and textually describe their items for sale, and set a time limit for how long the item can be bid on. Potential buyers bid on the item until the time window closes and a winner is identified. The identities of buyers and sellers are anonymous in that usernames are employed instead of legal names. When sellers list items for sale they do so by setting a baseline minimum price. The final price of an item is determined by how much individuals are willing to spend. Thus, item value, while somewhat dictated by market trends, is arguably subjective and contingent.

In many ways, eBay mimics elements of the yard sale in the virtual: used items are available for sale, sellers are in control of the presentation of their possessions, and value is driven by a careful negotiation between seller and potential buyers. Despite the possibility of anonymity offered by the internet, creating a certifiable identity is an essential part of selling one's items on eBay; due to the requirement that an eBay seller must establish trust when entering into financial trades with their buyers, who are likely strangers that the seller will never meet, identity on eBay must be verifiable and fairly fixed.[75] Thus, a continuity of identity supported by objects emerges as a central pillar of eBay's message.[76]

While eBay echoes some elements of the yard sale, it would be incorrect to cast eBay as a virtual surrogate for the yard sale. The most obvious difference between the two is the location of sales; yard sales happen outside of individuals' homes, take place in established communities, and require face-to-face interpersonal interaction whereas eBay sales occur online,

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[74] Ken Hillis Epley, Michael Petit, and Nathan Scott, *Everyday eBay: Culture, Collecting, and Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.

[75] Ken Hillis Epley, Michael Petit, and Nathan Scott, *Everyday eBay: Culture, Collecting, and Desire*, 5.

[76] Epley, *Everyday eBay*, 6.

are bound by neither geography, and do not require buyers and sellers enter into personal exchanges. Freyer uses some of these differences to his advantage, combining aspects of each to make *All My Life for Sale* a hybrid of the two models of commerce. Freyer works against the quasi-anonymity provided by eBay by providing detailed and personal descriptions for each of his items. He takes it a step further by asking for prolonged participation from his buyers as they send him updates and open their homes to him for Freyer's visits. *All My Life for Sale* develops from the community-focused and identity-based roots of the yard sale and eBay. Freyer combines elements from each while exaggerating the human-human connections possible through these alternative modes of commerce.

Participation and Agency

Creating human-human connections with this artwork requires cooperative participants. On the most basic of levels, participants allow for the acts of exchange that make up the core aspect of Freyer's work. There are myriad typologies of participatory art, with each creating particular ways in which a participant can be used in or contribute to an artistic work. Within Freyer's work, I argue that two types of participatory typologies are at play: participant-as-user and participant-as-co-creator. The typology of participant-as-user encompasses artworks that involve viewers physically and socially. Despite the fact that Freyer's piece lacks a unifying singular event like Fried's *Decomposition*, where all participants gather at once, the collective action of Freyer's participants creates a system built around objects *and* people. Unlike connections within a capitalist consumer system, Freyer's network such prefaces the social and the human above the material. Human social connection facilitated by or represented by objects abounds in Freyer's *All My Life for Sale.* Most of his eBay descriptions involving anecdotes

about the people in his life that are somehow connected to the possession for sale. These cheeky narratives are atypical for eBay listings and thus underscore the human-human connections and memories existing within objects:

> "**Salt Shaker and Salt:** Iodized salt, glass-and-steel shaker. The salt? I bought it in the HyVee grocery store in Iowa City, Iowa. The shaker? I think it's from my grandparents' estate. After my Grandmother passes away in 1996, I moved to Syracuse, New York, with Lanthea. My Aunt Patsy and Uncle Chuck had rented a storage space for much of the stuff from my grandparents' apartment in Florida. Having just moved into a new apartment, I took much of the kitchen stuff, including this shaker."[77]

> "**Wyoming T-shirt:** In January of 2000 I had just returned from visiting my family for Christmas when I had a drink at a bar with Micah, whom I had a crush on since the day I met her. During the conversation, we discovered that we had mutual friends in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and started to wonder if we could just drive out there. We went back and forth about how broke we were and our work schedules and such. At last call at George's Bar, we decided that she would pay for gas if I drove my car. So we went home to gather up enough stuff for two days and hit the road at about three A.M. or so. We arrived in Jackson eighteen house later and stayed at Krissi's house. While in Jackson I discovered that Micah had a crush on me too. Which lead me to believe in love at first sight and caused me to lose all sense of reason for the next three months. I found this shirt at the same thrift store where I bought my first western shirt in the summer of 1999. I didn't even have the dollar it cost, so I let Micha buy it. She looked pretty good in it too. I fell in love with her, almost bought two tickets to Las Vegas to marry her, and three months later we broke each other's hearts. I found this shirt under my bed this summer after I returned from New York."[78]

Freyer's Wyoming T-shirt (Fig. 10) had a total of 13 bids, which is fairly significant when the range of bidders on Freyer's possessions – 1 to 34 – is taken into account. As Freyer's stories became an integral part of the eBay selling process, the participants purchased the objects and the existing social connections forged through his objects. Thus, Freyer's network created a subversive system in which a consumer platform (eBay) is used to support meaningful human contact.

To understand the system of value being co-created by Freyer and his participants, a close look at Freyer's possessions, their monetary value, and their sentimental value is required. Freyer auctioned off a small number of non-material items in addition to his physical possessions. Some of his objects were truly valuable from a monetary standpoint, while most of

[77] Freyer, 21.

[78] Freyer, 31.

them were what one would consider 'junk.' The correlation between the item's monetary value, the price it sold for on eBay, and the number of bidders speaks to the complex value system that grew from the community that materialized during the course of *All My Life for Sale.*

Most of Freyer's items sold for under $20 . A handful of items did sell for prices in the $80 - $150 range, with most of these items being of high monetary value. A 'Wild Bill's Motorola Radio' sold for $128.50 to a radio collector. 'PowerBook Duo 250,' Freyer's computer (fig. 11), sold for $102.50 to a woman who was more interested in Freyer's journals that were stored on the computer than the machine itself. 'The T-4 Super and Fifty Photographs' sold for $153.50. 'Allmylifeforsale.com Domain Name' sold for $1,165.00 to the University of Iowa Museum of Art. This was by far highest price paid for any of Freyer's items. In this instance, the UIMA was buying the domain as a work of art rather than a material object.

Some of Freyer's items had far more bidders than one might expect for the quality or monetary value of the items themselves. This element of the work reveals that the sentimental value and narrative elements of the items' descriptions may have had an appeal to Freyer's participants in a way that the conventionally valuable items did not. 'Sarah's Christmas Gift,' a wrapped item purchased by Freyer for his sister, had 11 bidders (fig. 12). 'My Girlfriends' Favorite Sweater,' a very well-loved and worn-out United Colors of Benneton sweater, had 15 bids before it sold. 'Sara Gibb's Dad's Hat' had 20 bids while 'Saori Hoshi's Television,' an old, unremarkable TV used by Freyer's artist friend, had 18 bids. Based on the engagement that these items had on eBay, I conclude that items which already represented Freyer's existing social relationships were more compelling as objects to his bidders-turned-participants. These items that would serve as starting points for new interpersonal relationships between Freyer and his participants already had a rich, visible social history.

Similar to the descriptions of Freyer's possessions, the updates of each item Freyer sold on eBay are rich with personal description and reveal ongoing communication between Freyer and his participants. The updates also expose the agency of Freyer's participants and their tangible impact upon the unfolding of *All My Life for Sale*. Take, for example, the update Freyer wrote about the Salt Shaker and Salt (fig. 14):

> **Update:** Jenn and her daughter Paine were the first to send me an update on an item that I sold. They sent me a photograph of my salt shaker on the shelf above their stove and told me that they were regularly using my HyVee salt. At the end of the update they invited me to visit. I suddenly realized that a community might be forming around the objects that I was shipping around the country. I decided to take them up on their offer and soon started to inform the high bidders on my other objects that I might want to visit them too. I stopped by Jenn and Paine's house on September 3, 2001.[79]

It is here where participant as co-creator can be seen in action. Works within this typology rely on viewers' active participation and collaboration, and participants contribute their own ideas and creativity to the content and creation of the artwork.[80] Without Jenn and Paine, the new owners of Freyer's Salt Shaker and Salt, a key element of *All My Life for Sale* likely would have never occurred. As participants take part in Freyer's auctions, they set and change the monetary, and, as I will argue later, the sentimental value of each possession. They have control over Freyer's ability to keep tabs on his items and ultimately whether or not the artist can visit his former possessions in the future. While most of Freyer's participants are enthusiastic co-creators, not all buy into the premise of the work:

> **Update – Brown Telephone:** … The high bidder on this phone never sent me an update, but their eBay username sounded like they ran a vintage technology store, so I'm sure that they resold it to someone somewhere.[81]

> **Update – Prescription Safety Glasses and Green Polyester Pants:** Margaret Stratton bought both the pants and the glasses. She hasn't worn them out on the town yet, but if I ever get married I am going to ask her to

[79] Freyer, 21.

[80] Kaitavuori, 70.

[81] Freyer, 7.

> attend in these fine green pants… As for the glasses, she refuses to pay me for them, so she doesn't have to take them off my face.[82]
>
> **Update – My Sideburns:** I received an e-mail from the high bidder on my sideburns, who said he had grand plans for his new purchase. … A month later I received another e-mail from his saying that he no longer wanted to participate in my project. He decided to withdraw after he brought a copy of the *USA Today* article about my project and the Ziploc bag containing my sideburns to the head curator at the Pittsburgh Museum of Art. They refused to take the donations, and deemed the Ziploc bag and the project from which it came "Not Art!" …[83]

The buyer of the brown telephone refused to support the alternative system created by *All My Life for Sale*, instead opting to re-sell the phone for a likely higher price. Margaret Stratton's refusal of Freyer's glasses interferes with his ability to truly sell *all* of his possessions and participants like the winner of Freyer's Sideburns threaten system by their refusal to participate in the project in full. The active agency of Freyer's participants, and their ability to move the project in unforeseen, unplanned directions places Freyer's work within typologies of participation that place emphasis on the viewer-turned-participant and the new social systems created by their involvement in the work.

Through their involvement in the work, Freyer's participants create an entirely unique system of value that relies on acts of exchange. I argue that, despite his use of eBay and his minimal monetary gain, Freyer depend squarely upon the logic of the gift economy. The gift economy stands in opposition to the commodity economy, where commodity exchanges are impersonal, finite, center around monetary value and lack the ability to foster human relationships.[84] As gift economies are not centered around monetary value, they have the ability

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[82] Freyer, 9.

[83] Freyer, 105.

[84] Anna Moran and Sorcha O'Brien, eds., *Love Objects: Emotion, Design and Material Culture* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014) 13.

to represent entirely, and possibly radically, different value systems defined and upheld by the group of individuals participating in the gift economy.

The alternative value system created by *All My Life for Sale* began before Freyer even listed his items for sale on eBay. At the onset of the project, Freyer invited his friends, neighbors and even strangers to descended upon his apartment to tag items to be sold. Fried's friend Shari Degraw remarked, "It was an unusual thing to see. It was kind of fun, but it didn't feel right tagging his photos to be sold."[85] His one request was that the items were "representative of [his] life in Iowa City."[86] Freyer did not expand upon his conceptualization of this attribute, but it is from this point that he began to relinquish some creative control over his project, asking 'everyone he knew' to identify which of his possessions were connected to his identity as they saw it. It is at this point, when Freyer went from selling several possessions a week to *all* of his possessions in a matter of months that the importance of and validation of human-object-human relationships makes itself visible; *All My Life for Sale* is not simply about human-object relationships, but about relationships between people *through* objects.

In opposition to commodity exchanges, gift exchanges are centered around reciprocation, occur on gradual, or possibly infinite, timelines and create bonds between giver and receiver as the cycle of reciprocal gifting repeats. Gift exchange produces feelings between individuals involved in the exchange, sustaining both relationships and attachments between participants. Freyer may sell his possessions for a profit, however marginal, but he also uses the sale of his objects to establish an inherent, emotional value for each possession through his intimate descriptions which, in most cases, leaves the bidders and buyers with apparent feelings

[85] A.S. Berman, "Grad Student Puts His Life on the eBay Auction Block," USA TODAY, February 6, 2002.

[86] Freyer, ix.

of responsibility to care for Freyer's things and even provide him the opportunity to hear about or visit them in the future. According to art historian Miwon Kwon, artworks that engage in the logic of the gift need not involve literal gifts. Through establishing a system in which reciprocity is expected, implicit and explicit requests are made, and a sense of mutual obligation is created, Freyer's work shares the defining qualities of a gift economy.[87] Within an artwork that creates an economy of exchange, the audience is guided or provoked into a dynamic participatory role, which in turn transfers some agency from artist to the viewer-turned-participants.[88]

Freyer and his participants create a system in which commodity exchange is transformed into gift exchange . The micro-economy established by the exchanges between Freyer and participants hinges on the social bonds created through Freyer's objects. Commodity transactions have finite bounds: an item is for sale, it is purchased, and the transaction ends. Freyer's exchanges start as commodity exchanges as participants purchase his items for money, but they quickly shift into gift exchanges. Gift exchanges are personal, reciprocal, and often without finite ends. As participants send updates and photos to Freyer, and as Freyer visits participants across the country they enter into a series of non-monetary exchanges. The money-focused element of commodity exchange is replaced by the interpersonal essence of gift exchange.

Refashioning Rituals

The meaning of Freyer's possessions are continually shifting through each phase of *All My Life for Sale* and this is largely due in part to the various consumption rituals performed by

[87] Kwon, 232 from Dezeuze *The Do-It-Yourself Artwork*

[88] Kwon, 234.

the artist and participants alike. The meaning of the possessions change as their owners change and as their role in Freyer's work becomes part of their history. While these practices – possession rituals, exchange rituals and divestment rituals – originate in capitalist consumer economies, and are thus familiar to Freyer's participants, Freyer modifies elements of each, enabling these rituals to serve specific functions within his work. In inventorying, documenting, photographing and publicly describing his possessions for sale, Freyer enacts a series of possession rituals. He does this in order to claim his possessions as his own and transforms mass-produced consumer objects into personal possessions that assert his identity, represent the passage of time, and embody interpersonal relationships through their origin stories.[89] A sample of portions of Freyer's object descriptions both cement the artist firmly in the description of the objects and establish the objects as nodes upon Freyer's life's story:

> … these [pants] are from the green polyester suit that I vowed to get married in…. I once wore this jacket [D&D Auto Body Nylon Winter Jacket] in an ice storm in Saratoga Springs, New York. The nylon was so slippery that I was able to slide down the entire length of Caroline street on my stomach. … I like to collect free stuff [Match Books] from places I go, because it reminds me of where I've been. …[90]

According to McCracken, taking photographs of one's items is a common possession ritual that individual's enact in order to feel a sense of ownership and pride regarding their objects.[91] It thus makes sense that Freyer photographically documented his possessions before he sold them. The fact that Freyer *saved* the images of all of his sold possessions may be more significant. The more interesting possession ritual involved with *All My Life For Sale* is one enacted not by Freyer but by his participants. Documenting, talking about and displaying one's items are common possession rituals, but these acts are usually not mandated by another person;

[89] McCracken, 79.

[90] Freyer, *All My Life for Sale*.

[91] McCracken, 79.

Freyer modifies existing possession rituals when he asks his participants to photograph their new items and send those images, along with a written update, to the artist. Here, Freyer takes a ritual that is usually used to erase any former meaning from an object and bring it fully into the life of a new owner and instead uses it to cement his identity and his objects together within the new context of his participants' lives. Freyer's objects may now belong to his participants, but the items come with a history that must be acknowledged and adopted by his participants (at least those who willingly join the project). In this way, Freyer and his participants become connected through a material object, using a sale as a jumping-off point for a sustained relationship and the creation of a small community of individuals mutually invested in the care and history of Freyer's items.

What Freyer's personal and anecdotal descriptions do is prevent Freyer *and* his participants from successfully enacting conventional divestment rituals. Individuals practice divestment rituals to erase meaning from objects when the meaning is either associated with others or themselves. In the case of used objects, such as Freyer's possessions, individuals frequently employ divestment rituals in the form of washing, cleaning or modifying in order to erase the meaning associated with the previous owner and to establish their own.[92] When individuals prepare to rid themselves of an object, they attempt to erase meaning with which they have imbued their personal objects by association.[93] Consumers have admitted feeling strange about the idea of a stranger wearing their used clothing and have gone as far as to "fear the dispossession of personal meaning, a phenomenon that resembles the 'merging of identities' between transplant donors and recipients."[94] In a standard eBay listing, an everyday object (in

[92] McCracken, 80.

[93] Ibid.

[94] McCracken, 80.

opposition to an antique, rare item, unique art work, etc.) is presented from a neutral position with the necessary factual information. Dimensions, color, weight, and material are all expected data that accompany a listing. Save from a hand in a photo or the background of the seller's home behind an object in a photo, the identity of the seller and the emotional history of the item remains a mystery to anyone participating in the bidding. This allows for newly purchased used items to enter into their new owner's lives with little baggage, thus enabling their integration into a person's life and identity. Through his detailed descriptions and his request for similarly intimate updates of his items from their new owners, Freyer attempts to remove all divestment rituals from the exchange process, asking both himself and his participants to take into account the entire history of an object they have now shared ownership of.

Freyer's descriptions of his objects are atypical for eBay listings. Visiting one's former possessions is quite atypical as far as object rituals go. Freyer ties his history to his objects through their detailed and personal descriptions. The artist solicits personal information about his participants by asking for updates about his objects in their new homes. Both of these acts introduce Freyer's life to his participants through his objects in an abstract way, but Freyer physically visiting his objects and meeting his participants truly materializes the artist's life. Freyer's visits also materialize the lives of his participants, which puts a priority on human-human connection through the object, thus allowing for the objects themselves to act more as facilitators. This means that by the end of Freyer's unfinished trip around the country to see his objects. the focus of *All My Life for Sale* shifted from Freyer's material objects to the interpersonal relationships between the artist and his participants.

The central feature of Freyer's work is that it offers an alternate model for consumption that is neither alienating nor controlling. Unlike Fried, Freyer creates a digital-cum-physical

space in which objects are an entry point into lasting interpersonal relationships. Fried allows for his participants to make meaningful contributions to his work, thus creating a community in which there is share authorship over his work. Whereas Fried recreated the totalizing and dominating elements of consumerism through his work, Freyer attempts to circumvent the negative aspects of consumption in order to create an alternative mode of exchange in which the currency is storytelling. Through *All My Life for Sale*, Freyer celebrates the connectivity provided by the objects and their stories. In contrast, the next chapter's artist, Michael Landy, capitalizes on the emotional power of objects in quite a different way. While Freyer exchanges his objects with others in order to highlight the social elements of possessions, Landy destroys his objects in order to test their ability to act as social bonds.

CHAPTER 3: BREAK DOWN

Michael Landy stood in the middle of a series of conveyor belts upon which every single worldly possession he owned slowly passed, carried in bright yellow plastic trays. Twelve workers, dressed in blue coveralls, were stationed around the belt, each smashing, ripping, slicing, hammering, and stripping Landy's possessions. Purple raincoats, love letters, Gillette razors, and LP records were reduced to piles of nylon, cotton, paper, plastic, metal and vinyl. This process of destruction took place in the empty first floor of a former C&A department store located in the center of London's bustling Oxford Street Shopping district (fig. 15). 50,000 people stopped to watch the two-week long performance. Many looked on quietly, confused by the unexpected scene where mere weeks before racks of clothing, shelves of shoes, and counters featuring makeup, perfumes and expensive jewelry had stood. Instead of the expected inventory of a department store, viewers found themselves surrounded by *Break Down*, a work comprised all 7,227 possessions that Michael Landy had accumulated over his 37 years of life (fig. 16).

Although critics and scholars have labeled *Break Down* as squarely anti-consumerist, Landy has described his seminal piece in softer terms, casting it as "examination of consumerism."[95] *Break Down* is "as much an open question as [it is] an attack" on what has become the most powerful ideology of the twenty-first century: consumerism.[96] I argue that it is

[95] Artangel, "Michael Landy in Conversation with Mechanic Dave Nutt Who Dismantled Landy's Car.," Artangel, February 20, 2010, 3.

[96] Stallabrass Julian, "Michael Landy in Conversation with Julian Stallabrass," in *Break Down* (London: Artangel, 2001), 5.

more fruitful to view Landy's work as a *product of* consumerism, rather than an outright critique. First, I posit that *Break Down* is Landy's reaction to living in a society in which one is defined by what they own. Secondly, I argue that by destroying his life's possessions en masse, Landy questions the power of the material object in the formation and perpetuation of social bonds. The existing and resulting social bonds within Landy's work are layered, involving the artist, his Operatives, and his audience, as all are involved in the destruction of his possessions. Through their collective participation in object destruction, all involved are able to develop social bonds with one another through Landy's possessions. Landy's work lays bare the emotional currency of the object while questioning whether the destruction of objects necessarily leads to the destruction of the social bond. Ultimately, and even surprisingly, the destruction of Landy's possessions created new, and strengthened existing, social connections thus exposing the strength and fundamental power of objects as agents of social bonds.

If the old adage 'we are what we own' is true in a contemporary society, what are the implications of Landy's choice to destroy everything from his underwear to his car? If social bonds, individual identity, and culture itself are formed by and through objects, what does it mean to have none? I will begin my analysis of Landy's seminal work with a discussion of the role of the department store in consumerist society. I will argue that Landy's creation of new social bonds via object destruction acts as a resistance to the conventional expectations of the department store as a cultural institution. Following this, I will interrogate the actual and theoretical consequences of Landy destroying his possessions in the context of a culture in which objects play a central role. Lastly, I will examine the responses of Landy's audience and his Operatives in an attempt to uncover the significance behind Landy's choice to publicly destroy his possessions. I argue that because of the emotional currency of the object, new connections

can still be formed between Landy, his audience, and his Operatives, demonstrating that even in their destruction, personal possessions can still create potent social bonds.

Landy spent over a year carefully inventorying every object he owned before it took the artist and his team two weeks to systematically destroyed all of his earthly possessions. Landy's possessions are sorted into nine categories; **A** (art), **C** (clothing), **E** (electrical), **F** (furniture), **K** (kitchen), **L** (leisure), **P** (perishables), **R** (reading), **S** (studio) and **V** (vehicle).[97] To categorize 7,227 objects into only nine categories meant that each category was necessarily broad. Within the Leisure category could be found such disparate items as L17464 'Single 10 Dollar Bill,' L2452 'Photograph of Gillian Wearing [Landy's partner] lying on blue sofa in Michael Landy's pyjamas, talking on telephone, Huberd House,' and L2049 'Cat toy, small white furry mouse with pink eyes and missing tail.' The cataloguing process was slow going and highly detailed digital records were created for each item within a database. A large system of conveyor belts was constructed, with each of Landy's items circling around on the system as his team removed them to be destroyed (fig. 17). As items were destroyed, they were once again entered into a database. The inventory was printed out and hung up on the walls around the conveyor belts of *Break Down*, inviting viewers to reflect upon the types of items kept by the artist and, quite possibly, themselves, while also serving as the sole surviving record of Landy's possessions after they were destroyed (fig. 18).

Legacy of the Department Store

As Landy's work centers around an individual and his possessions, the socio-material culture of England's domestic consumption is relevant to an analysis of *Break Down*. In the late

[97] The artist has never publicly explained the process behind choosing the nine categories he used to organize his possessions.

nineteenth century, popular periodicals began running 'at home' articles which featured photographs and written analysis of well-known individuals' homes. It was asserted that by seeing a person's possessions, one could uncover truths about their owners. The high-back chairs of Alfred Tennyson's home were said to reflect the poet's "sterner moods."[98] Through these images of home, the inner self of the occupant was revealed. As the purchasing power of the Victorian Brit expanded, so did the idea that interior spaces, and the possessions that populated them, exposed something inherent and essential about the individual that amassed and arranged said objects. Landy's work may not feature the interior space from which his objects came, but this choice, I argue, speaks to the contemporary moment in which individuals are preoccupied by the pressing need to consume material objects. By presenting his possessions in a former department store Landy is drawing attention to the cycle of near-compulsive consumption; without the intimacy of the home-space, his possessions and their relationship to mass-production and the act of purchasing is laid bare.[99]

Early department stores acted as local social centers where individuals could shop and socialize.[100] As department stores grew and large chains replaced smaller, locally owned stores couldn't keep up.[101] As a consequence, the local social atmosphere of the small department store

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[98] Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 123.

[99] Landy has expressed that it was always his intention to stage *Break Down* in a shopping mall or store. As the work's commissioning organization, Art Angel, is dedicated to funding public art projects across London, Landy *had* to make his work accessible to the public. *Break Down* took place in the former location of the C&A flagship store. C&A stopped trading on January 27, 2001 (Stuart Burch, *London and the Politics of Memory : In the Shadow of Big Ben*, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 179). By May 2001, all 109 London C&A stores had been closed (Jim Armitage, "JJB Takes C&A Oxford Street Store." (London Evening Standard, February 13, 2002)). As of October 2020, C&A is still a functioning company with over 1,500 locations across Europe.

[100] Vicki Howard, *From Main Street to Mall: The Rise and Fall of the American Department Store* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 2.

[101] Howard, *From Main Street to Mall: The Rise and Fall of the American Department Store*, 3.

was usurped by the larger, standardized chain department store and with it went a way of life. Over the course two centuries, the department store grew to be a defining feature of consumption, acting as a destination rather than simply a well-stocked store.[102] Once called "palaces of consumption" department stores offered everything one needed in one place, structuring consumer habits and the lives of cities and suburban communities alike.[103] Following the second world war, standardization and company conglomeration caused the shopping experience to become uniform with stores across the country and oceans selling similar merchandise.[104] Stores began to keep profiles of shoppers which enabled them to understand and predict the consumer behaviors of store clients.[105] Department stores helped to generate new consumer desires, representing anonymous, commodity-oriented consumer ethic that was based upon spending.[106]

The department store was as much a social institution as it was an economic one. The department store offered a promise of expression, fulfilment, and the possibility of self-reinvention through the constant acquisition of goods. Yet this promise was one that was carefully manufactured and advertised by the purveyors of goods, and ultimately one that no amount of consumption could fulfill.[107] Consumerism historian Stewart Ewen wrote about the department store and its connection to modern advertising, arguing that advertising shaped the

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[102] Jonathan Glancey, "A History of the Department Store," BBC Culture, accessed November 14, 2019.

[103] Howard, *From Main Street to Mall*, 5.

[104] Howard, 3.

[105] Purbrick, 12.

[106] Howard, 6.

[107] Purbrick, 11.

"needs and desires of consumers to fit what leaves the factory gate."[108] Advertising was thus a method of "social control," and by extension so was the department store.[109] I argue that Landy's choice of location for *Break Down* was intended as an act of resistance to this element of social control represented by the department store. In fashioning new social bonds through the destruction of objects, Landy is pushing back against conventional expectations of the department store as a cultural institution.

Deliberate Destruction

After the inventory process was complete, Landy and twelve-person crew began systematically disassembling destroying all 7,227 items using carefully crafted, detailed systems and manuals created by Landy. LPs, Landy's passport and birth certificate, old family photos, love letters, artwork created by his peers, clothing, electronics, and Landy's father's prized sheepskin coat traveled around the conveyor belt of the destruction apparatus. *Break Down* is visually, structurally, and systematically based upon a recycling reclamation facility and is thus automatically concerned with both materiality and the corresponding value assigned to whole objects and raw materials. The purpose of a recycling reclamation facility is to break objects down and separate reusable, valuable materials from useless waste materials. Reusable materials are given another life as they are used to create new things while waste materials are typically deposited into landfills. While *Break Down* visually mimics a recycling reclamation facility, no raw materials were sorted out for reuse. Every item that traveled around the conveyor belt was

[108] Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (New York: Leicester University Press, 1995., 1995), 164.

[109] Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History*, 164.

dismantled, its materials reduced to the smallest size possible, and then sent to a landfill in large, plastic bags once the project was finished (fig. 20 - 22). In *Break Down*, no material is deemed more valuable than the next. Thus, Landy presents the concept of material value as inconsequential to the way in which his work functions both literally and figuratively. As we will see in the next section, it is the emotional value of Landy's possessions that is the most meaningful.

The apparatus, though based upon a recycling reclamation facility, also resembled that of a factory floor similar to the thousands of factories from which Landy's possessions once came. Why destroy the possessions at all if they were only headed for the garbage? Landy has explained that in disassembling his possessions he is recreating the process of discovery that he experienced as a child. "When I was a kid, I used to pull things apart … because you wanted to understand how things work," the artist remarked.[110] Landy seems to imply that there is a discovery to be made about consumerism itself that can be reached by disassembling the products of consumption. The use of an apparatus that references both factories, where objects are made, and recycling facilities, where objects are mined for still-usable parts or discarded, puts personal possessions into the context of their entire lifecycle. "I've worked in a textile factory," Operant Barry remarked, "and I can tell you that the management-worker relations here are exactly the same. This is really a microcosm of industrial life."[111] By comingling his possessions and the factory-like setting of their destruction, Landy seems to be making an attempt at de-fetishizing the commodity; by drawing attention to ideas of production Landy

[110] *Michael Landy - Artist Talk* (AA School of Architecture, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzR2AIeZZjA&ab_channel=AASchoolofArchitecture.

[111] Gabriele Wood, "Going for Broke | From the Observer | The Guardian," *The Guardian*, February 2001, https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2001/feb/18/featuresreview.review.

denies the traditional autonomy that is given to the commodity.[112] Landy is drawing attention to the production of the object and in doing so he connects it back to the systems of human labor that get obscured through mass consumption. Furthermore, Landy works to de-fetishize the commodity by revealing another reason behind the objects power: its role in social relationships. In using a factory setting and a team of Operatives, Landy draws attention to the human-object relationships that are present in the creation of any good.

Break Down is a work in which the connection between humans and objects is central. Despite this element, Landy has expressed ambivalence regarding the true significance of his possessions. On the one hand, the complete destruction of his possessions signals a refusal to be defined by what he owns. Still, Landy was adamant that he did not want anyone to "have" his belongings after *Break Down* was over. This choice came at a significant financial cost to the artist, as selling the shredded remains of his objects to collectors and museums could have helped cover the cost of the project not covered by the funding organization Art Angel, not to mention the cost of replacing his possessions. The act of erasing personal traces of oneself from a possession before its disposal is not novel. In fact, this is a common enough practice that it has been given a name by anthropologist Grant McCracken: divestment rituals. When people prepare to rid themselves of an object, they often attempt to erase meaning with which they have imbued their personal objects by association. These rituals can take many forms and Landy's choice to shred, pulverize, and granulate his possessions goes far beyond the more common divestment rituals such as cleaning or removing any personal traces from an object. Even after his possessions have been rendered unusable and unrecognizable, they seemingly still have a

[112] Michael T. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 28.

tangible meaning to Landy, so much so that the idea of anyone having them is unimaginable to the artist. It is of note that consumers have admitted to feeling uneasy about the idea of a stranger wearing their used clothing, and have gone as far as to feel apprehensive about the proper dispossession of an object's personal meaning, the idea being that part of their identity could somehow be left within the object.[113] It is as if Landy is attempting to assert that his possessions are *not* central to his identity while revealing that he may still feel they are imbued with his essence in a way that makes the idea of anyone possessing his shredded objects threatening.

A Critique of Consumption: *Break Down's* Critical Reception

Break Down was a career defining work for Landy; the artist commented that he probably forever be known as "that bloke who destroyed all his belongings."[114] *Break Down* received a significant amount of press, and "perhaps unsurprisingly, the analytic thrust of commentaries and discussions of Break Down … focused on the work as a critique of consumption," writes Harriet Hawkins.[115] The popular press also cast Landy's work as a diatribe against overconsumption with headlines like "Mad Man at C&A," "When he says everything must go, he means it," "Shredding his consumerist life Art: Michael Landy will pulp all his possessions, including a 1988 Saab, during a 14-day art criticism of consumerism." Scholars also positioned Landy's work squarely in opposition to capitalist consumerism. Jen Harvie has framed *Break Down* as a theatrical and performative disruption to global consumerism's

[113] McCracken, 80.

[114] *Michael Landy - Artist Talk* (AA School of Architecture, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzR2AIeZZjA&ab_channel=AASchoolofArchitecture.

[115] Harriet Hawkins, *For Creative Geographies: Geography, Visual Arts and the Making of Worlds* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 108.

processes. Harvie classifies Landy's work as an "intervention in the apparent inevitabilities of global consumer capitalism's processes, time, space, and alienation of both producers and consumers."[116] What most critics and scholars failed to address was the social relationships and emotional connections developed between the Operatives and Landy through his possessions. These relationships and the ways in which they were rapidly developed will be the focus of the following section.

Destruction of Objects, Creation of Social Bonds: Participation in *Break Down*

Landy's work is different from that of Fried and Freyer because it was performed in front of an audience. Whereas *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe* and *All My Life for Sale* are comprised of closed networks of artists and individuals, Lany's work involves the artist, his Operatives, and an audience.. Thus, the social relationships born from *Break Down* are more nuanced. In Landy's accounts of *Break Down* he consistently returns to the reactions and roles of the audience within the work, revealing the ways in which *Break Down* was dependent upon the interactions between the viewers, Landy's Operatives, and his possessions. Although arguably dissimilar to the participant groups belonging to Fried and Freyer, I argue that Landy's audience is as much a group of participants as are the individuals involved in *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe* and *All My Life for Sale*, and that Landy's Operatives are most certainly participants. *Break Down*'s participants were not passive consumers, but rather were active creators, helping to turn the work into "a real thing."[117] With an average of over 3,500 visitors a

[116] Jen Harvie, "Witnessing Michael Landy's Break Down : Metonymy, Affect, and Politicised Performance in an Age of Global Consumer Capitalism1," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 16, no. 1 (February 2006): 62–72.

[117] Artangel, "Michael Landy in Conversation with Mechanic Dave Nutt Who Dismantled Landy's Car.," Artangel, February 20, 2010, https://www.artangel.org.uk/break-down/michael-landy-in-conversation-with-dave-nutt/.

day, *Break Down* not only represents Landy's relationship with his own possessions, but also that of his audience members' and his Operatives with their own belongings.

As Landy's work is performative in nature, *Break Down*'s audience is crucial in the meaning making of the work. The reactions of *Break Down*'s viewers cum participants varied widely. During the first few days, several individuals entered the space under the assumption that it was still a functioning department store. Approaching Landy and his Operatives, they attempted to return shirts and sundries only to be turned away. Many were appalled, some were deeply moved, and others perplexed, but it is certain that feelings of ambivalence or disinterest could not be seen on the faces of *Break Down*'s audience. Unlike the participants in Fried and Freyer's works, the audience of *Break Down* do not fit into the previously discussed typologies of participatory art; they are not material or co-creators, but rather function as targets. Participatory works that employ participants as targets are often used to construct situations and function as interventions, while engaging unknowing participants and pushing them to react to the work.[118] Much like Landy's *Break Down*, artworks that fall into the target typology work within existing, identifiable systems, often in public places and social settings.[119] By staging *Break Down* in the very center of London's Oxford shopping district, Landy was courting viewers who were likely in the process of looking at, shopping for, and acquiring consumer goods. Viewers could watch representations of their newly purchased items make their way through Landy's destruction process as the boundaries between their own objects and Landy's possessions blurred, if only momentarily.

[118] Kaitavouri, 18.

[119] Kaitaviouri, 20.

Landy's Operatives had the most intimate relationships with his objects, and thus I argue that this bonded the artist and his Operatives through Landy's objects. In conversation with Saab mechanic-turned-Operative David Nutt, Landy remarked that his crew could have spent the entirety of the two week-long performance speaking with curious audience members. It is here that Landy's Operatives begin to act as stand-ins for the artist, speaking on his behalf as they destroy his objects. Landy had anticipated a curious audience and the artist felt the need to prepare for the expectant and chatty audience.[120] Some of the audience was incredibly perturbed by Landy's destruction and this reaction can be attributed to the common belief that possessions act as an extension of self. "You weren't trying to create an emotive environment," remarked Saab mechanic David Nutt, "it was just happening of its own accord."[121] The destruction of Landy's possessions was a charged event at which everyone present had space to reflect on their own possessions and the connections forged by belongings.

A crucial element of *Break Down* is that Landy himself did not destroy his own possessions. Rather, he employed a team to carry out the physical parts of his work while he and his audience looked on. *Break Down*'s viewers were not the only people to have complex emotional responses to the work; Landy's twelve Operatives reported having deeply intimate and charged reactions to their involvement in the destruction of the artist's possessions (fig. 23 - 24). As the only people who came into contact with Landy's possessions, the Operatives more closely resemble the participants of Fried and Freyer's works than do the members of Landy's audience. In fact, Landy did not take part in the physical destruction of his objects. Instead, he stood atop a

[120] Landy claimed that he 'read up' before performing breakdown, but did not give specifics about the materials he read in order to prepare. *Michael Land - Artist Talk* (AA School of Architecture, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzR2AIeZZjA&ab_channel=AASchoolofArchitecture.

[121] Artangel, "Michael Landy in Conversation with Mechanic Dave Nutt Who Dismantled Landy's Car," Artangel, February 20, 2010, https://www.artangel.org.uk/break-down/michael-landy-in-conversation-with-dave-nutt/.

9ft-high platform as he separated his shredded possessions by material into large bins.[122] Much like in Freyer's work, those involved in *Break Down* were not performing conventional divestment rituals. *Break Down*'s strict destruction protocols required the Operatives to spend time with each object they were destroying, which gave them access to Landy's life as it was represented by his possessions. Landy and his Operatives also began to form new rituals around destruction: they listened to the same song every morning (Joy Division's "Love Will Tear Us Apart"), broke every day for tea around Landy's Saab, and selected a mascot (Rocky the Lobster, a singing lobster figuring from a gadget shop on Oxford Street).[123] The communal destruction of Landy's possessions forged new social bonds between the artist and his Operatives, allowing them to create their own rituals through which they connected.

Landy's Operatives not only destroyed his possessions, but they also got a deeply intimate look at the artist's life. This enabled them to understand Landy through his objects and thus develop a bond to the artist. By the end of *Break Down*, Landy began to refer to his Operatives as 'Disciples,' a designation he never expanded upon. Operative Gail commented that in the early days of *Break Down,* destroying Landy's possessions was invigorating. By the end of the two weeks, however, she remarked that all the operatives had grown quite attached to Landy's things; "you're sad to see them go," she admitted.[124] Statements like this, I argue, serve as evidence of the bond being established between Landy and his operatives through objects. Heather spent the two weeks reading and then destroying all of Landy's love letters and books.

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[122] Artangel, "Michael Landy Reflects on Break Down," Artangel, April 2002, https://www.artangel.org.uk/break-down/michael-landy-on-break-down/.

[123] Artangel, "Michael Landy Reflects on Break Down."

[124] Wood, "Going for Broke."

Another operative accused Landy of being "a bit of a bastard" after reading a letter penned by one of Landy's former lovers.[125] David Nutt, a London-based Saab mechanic charged with dismantling Landy's Saab 900 165 turbo 16S, became quite close with Landy over the short period of *Break Down*. Objects can function as materialized connections between individuals and a small representation of Landy and Nutt's connection – one of Nutt's Saab leaflets – was destroyed along with Landy's possessions. Though Nutt never commented upon the destruction of this materialized social connection he did express that participating in *Break Down* had a significant impact upon him. Nutt, a practicing Tibetan Buddhist, made away with granules of Landy's Saab, depositing it beneath the Bhodi tree in Bodhgaya, India, a sacred tree.[126] "*Break Down* formed a part of a spiritual journey that I went on," Nutt remarked in an interview with Landy.[127] For Nutt, grappling with the idea of complete material dispossession was a highly spiritual experience. The Saab mechanic likened Landy's work to the Buddhist concept of renunciation, which involves being free from connection to anything that isn't a true necessity. Despite Nutt's spiritual perception of *Break Down*, Landy himself did not share Nutt's interpretation.

Despite claiming that *Break Down* was a euphoric experience, Landy openly expressed contempt towards his Operatives destroying certain objects. "I'm going to kill the operative who destroys my dad's coat," the artist said in reference to the most sentimentally evocative and written about possession in *Break Down.*[128] Landy's father purchased a heavy Sheepskin coat

[125] Artangel, "Michael Landy Reflects on Break Down."

[126] Artangel, "Michael Landy in Conversation with Mechanic Dave Nutt Who Dismantled Landy's Car."

[127] Artangel, "Michael Landy in Conversation with Mechanic Dave Nutt"

[128] Wood, "Going for Broke."

when he was the age, 37 years, that Landy was when he performed *Break Down* (fig. 25). Landy's father had paid for the coat in installments and suffered a life-altering accident as a miner shortly after the coat was brought home. To Landy, and his family, the sheepskin coat represented the accident that crippled the artist's father and the impact that this event had upon their lives. It is not without significance that the sheepskin coat was the very last item to be destroyed. "I did say at the beginning to all the people working here to try and do it as lovingly as they possibly can," Landy remarked, revealing that even in their destruction his items were to be treated with care; this speaks to Landy's experience of his possessions as an extension or representation of himself. Landy remarked that the title of the work refers the act of breaking items down to their parts while also acting as play on words, conjuring up the nervous breakdown. If we are indeed what we own, then the mass destruction of our possessions can be equated to the destruction of self.

By complicating and systematizing the disposal of his objects Landy creates a physical and mental space in which his audience, Operatives, and he himself can consider the material elements of their lives Landy's work speaks to a culture that is ambivalent about being structured around the object, revealing how we are at once everything we own and somehow more. Landy does not deny the potency of the object, but through his destruction of it he denies being identified solely by what he owns. In farming out the labor of destruction to his Operatives and bringing others into the process, Landy is able to build social connections to others even as his objects become piles of scraps. Unlike Fried and Freyer, Landy does not release his objects into the care of others. Rather, he enlists the help of his Operatives to shoulder the emotional burden of destruction and in doing so forges new social bonds.

CONCLUSION

Utilizing methodologies and theories from anthropology and material culture studies, this thesis has put forward an analysis of Howard Fried's *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe*, John D. Freyer's *All My Life for Sale*, and Michael Landy's *Break Down* that underlines these works' creation of novel consumption systems that prioritize social bonds. I have argued that although the work of these three artists actively engage with existing models of consumption, they strategically modify the object rituals of possession, exchange, and divestment in order to foster bonds between their used possessions and their participants. In these works, Fried, Freyer, and Landy rid themselves of their personal possessions without erasing the histories belonging to these objects. In doing so, they enable the stories of their possessions to act as a cement, bonding their participants to their objects and quite possibly themselves.

In chapter one, I evaluated the theme of control in Howard Fried's *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe*. In controlling the object rituals of his participants, Fried attempts to control the relationships that they develop with his late mother's wardrobe. Fried creates a network of strangers around the wardrobe of his late mother in an effort to disperse her memory in material form.

With the second chapter I examine a work that similarly creates an alternative economy and social network: John D. Freyer's *All My Life for Sale*. I consider the agency of Freyer's participants and the community of reciprocity that is built through unusual acts of exchange using the online commerce platform eBay. Freyer and his participants enact object rituals in such a way that they are able to each identify with an object without needing to negate the objects'

pasts. In the case of All My Life for Sale, the object is but a starting point for a community built around Freyer's possessions that prioritizes social bonds over material goods.

Lastly, I use the third chapter to look at Michael Landy's *Break Down* and the persistent power of consumer goods to act as vehicles of identity and connection even as they are being destroyed. In employing others in his process of dispossession, Landy reveals that intimate social bonds can be formed quickly through objects, even as they are being pulverized, granulated, and torn to shreds. I argue that Landy's work especially engages with the contradictory nature of identity formation as it relates to material consumption that the works of Fried and Freyer do not quite manage.

Ultimately, these artworks ask: is anything sentimental left when we divest of our things? Do social relationships disappear with a lack of possessions? What is the power of the commodity good and can it become meaningful in new ways within consumer society? As a scholar of material culture, Louise Purbrick writes:

> To consider material forms as repositories of affection and not just desire, of longing as opposed to preference, of love of all kinds, demands some rethinking of the status of objects in capitalist and consumer culture. Such feelings show the limits of commodity worlds. If a thing can create affection, then the illusion of human fulfillment falsely promised in the marketplace might actually be real: a fairytale can come true.[129]

Here, I claim that *The Decomposition of My Mother's Wardrobe*, *All My Life for Sale*, and *Break Down* offer space to rethink the "status of objects in capitalist and consumer culture" as one that can provide genuine connection if positioned differently within our rituals and within our culture. Each artist depends upon objects as a starting point for social bonds but does not need the object to sustain interpersonal relationships. The key in each of these works is that it is the dispossession of objects that generates social bonds; in each work a subversion of customary

[129] Purbrick, 11.

consumer practices was necessary in order to generate new and meaningful social bonds via the object.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Howard Fried, *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe*, 2014 – present.

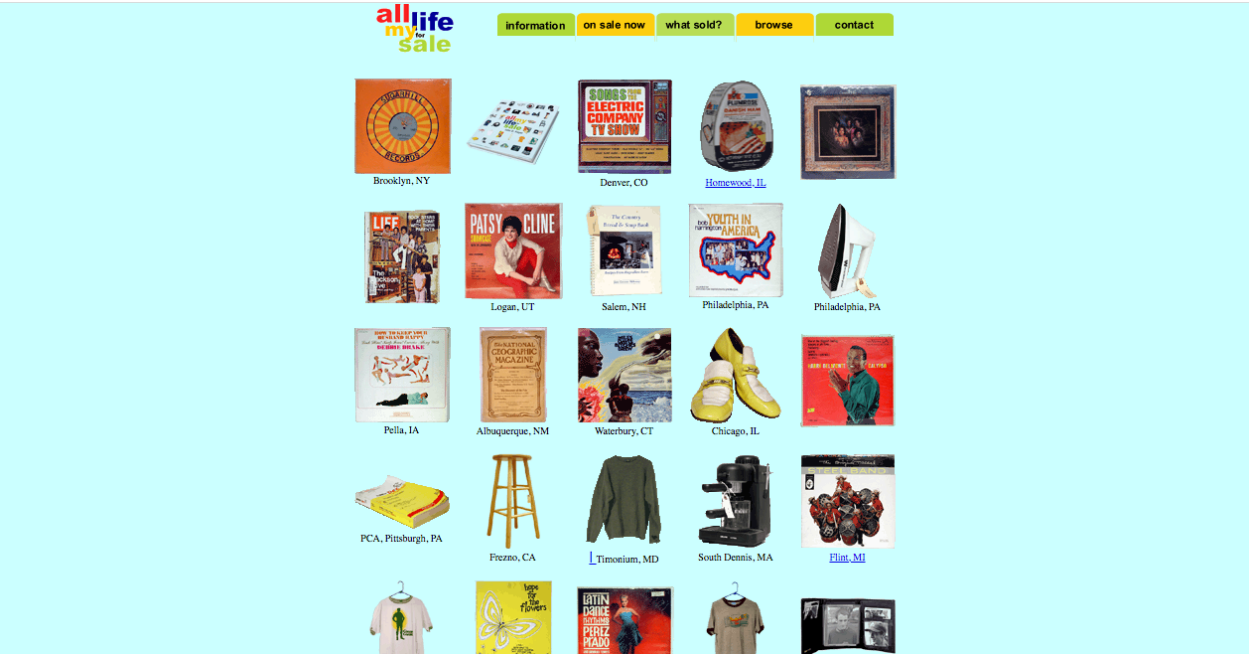


Figure 2. John D. Freyer, screenshot of the webpage for *All My Life for Sale*, 2001.

Figure 3. Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001.

Figure 4. Ben Kinmont, 2001 exhibition view of the archive from *Exchange,* 1995.

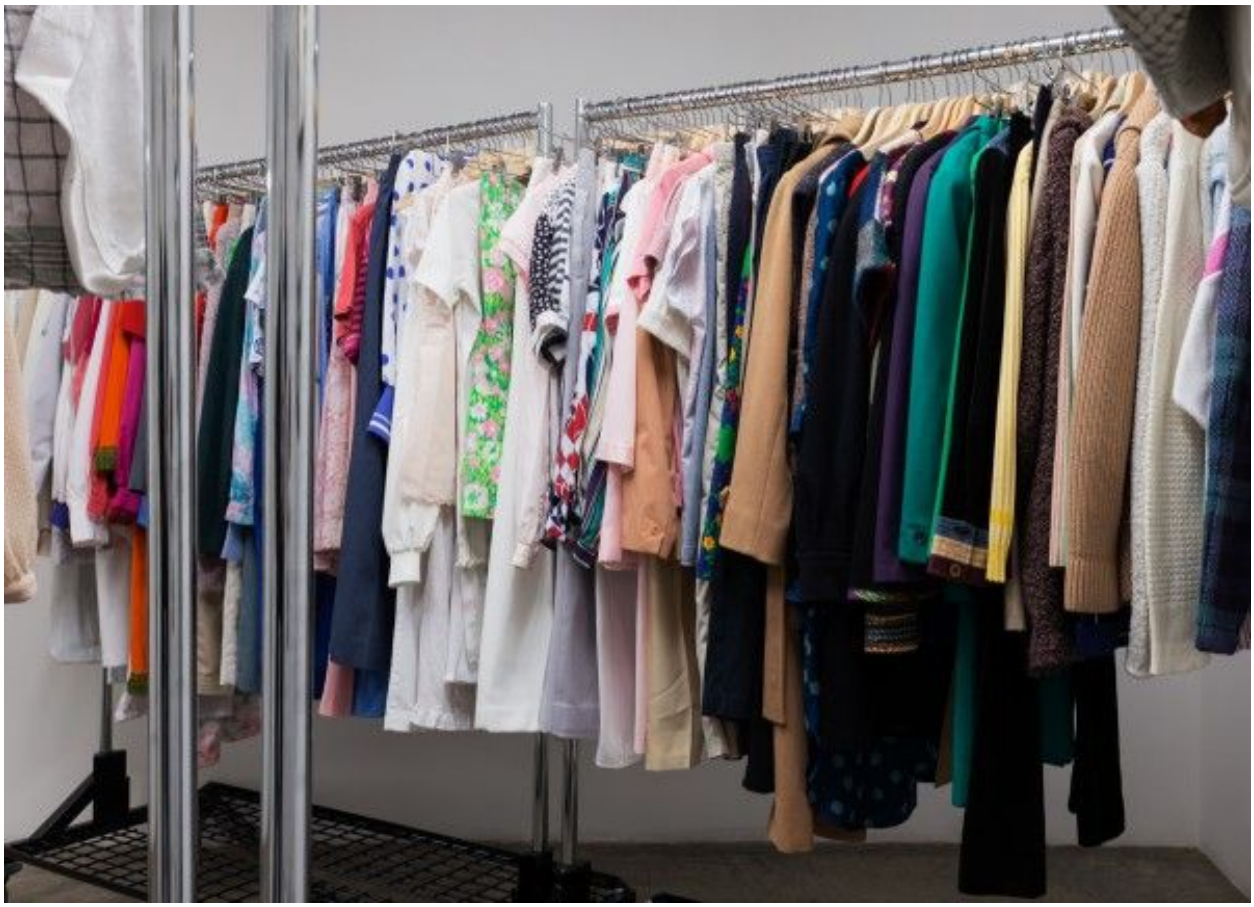


Figure 5. Howard Fried, *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe*, 2014 – present.

Figure 6. Howard Fried, *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe*, 2014 – present.

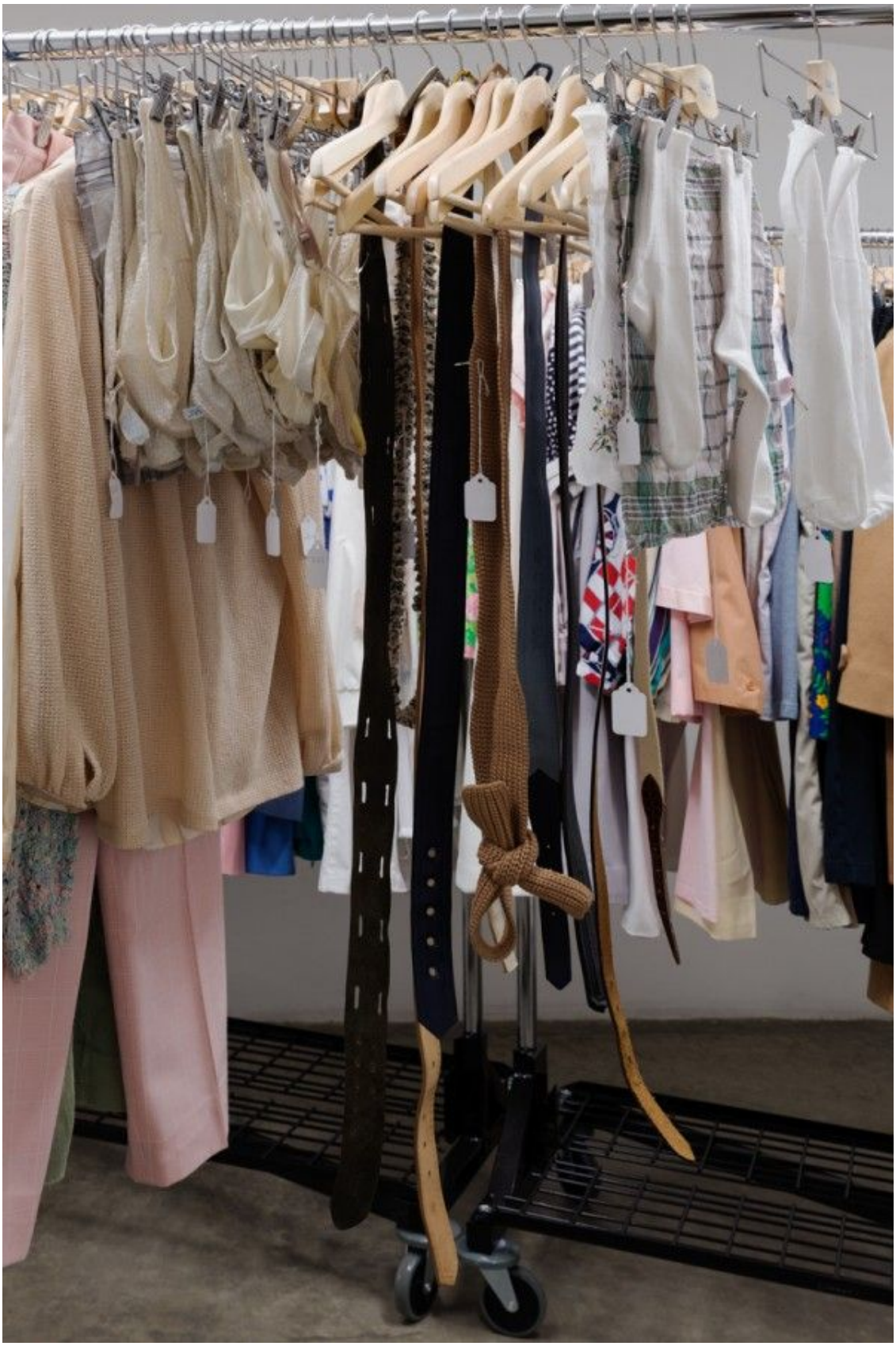
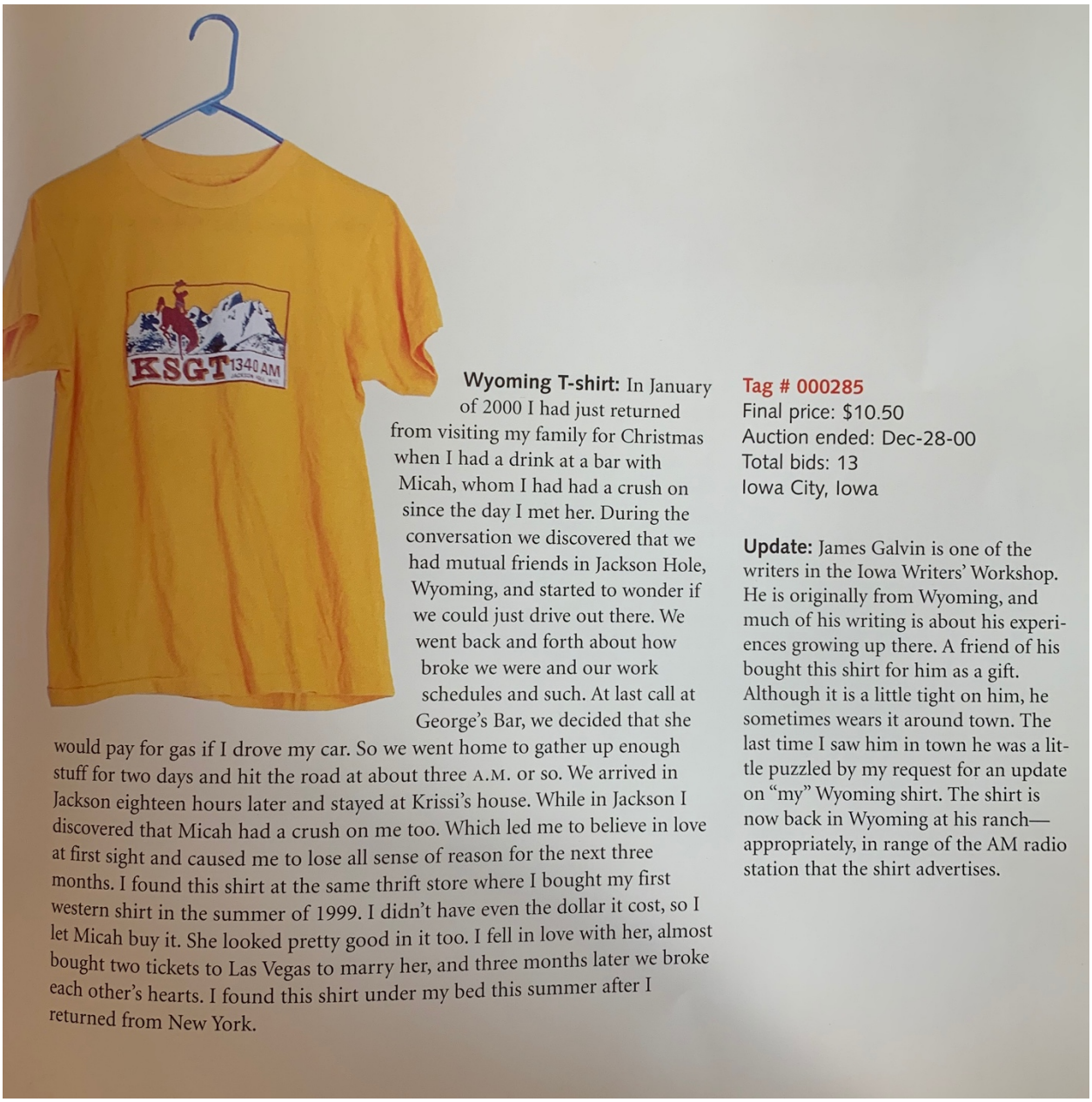


Figure 7. Howard Fried, *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe*, 2014 – present.

Figure 8. Howard Fried, *The Decomposition of my Mother's Wardrobe*, 2014 – present.

Figure 9. Howard Fried, *Patternmaker*, 1984.



Wyoming T-shirt: In January of 2000 I had just returned from visiting my family for Christmas when I had a drink at a bar with Micah, whom I had had a crush on since the day I met her. During the conversation we discovered that we had mutual friends in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and started to wonder if we could just drive out there. We went back and forth about how broke we were and our work schedules and such. At last call at George's Bar, we decided that she would pay for gas if I drove my car. So we went home to gather up enough stuff for two days and hit the road at about three A.M. or so. We arrived in Jackson eighteen hours later and stayed at Krissi's house. While in Jackson I discovered that Micah had a crush on me too. Which led me to believe in love at first sight and caused me to lose all sense of reason for the next three months. I found this shirt at the same thrift store where I bought my first western shirt in the summer of 1999. I didn't have even the dollar it cost, so I let Micah buy it. She looked pretty good in it too. I fell in love with her, almost bought two tickets to Las Vegas to marry her, and three months later we broke each other's hearts. I found this shirt under my bed this summer after I returned from New York.

Tag # 000285
Final price: $10.50
Auction ended: Dec-28-00
Total bids: 13
Iowa City, Iowa

Update: James Galvin is one of the writers in the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He is originally from Wyoming, and much of his writing is about his experiences growing up there. A friend of his bought this shirt for him as a gift. Although it is a little tight on him, he sometimes wears it around town. The last time I saw him in town he was a little puzzled by my request for an update on "my" Wyoming shirt. The shirt is now back in Wyoming at his ranch—appropriately, in range of the AM radio station that the shirt advertises.

Figure 10. John D. Freyer 'Wyoming T-shirt,' *All My Life for Sale*, 2001, pp. 31.

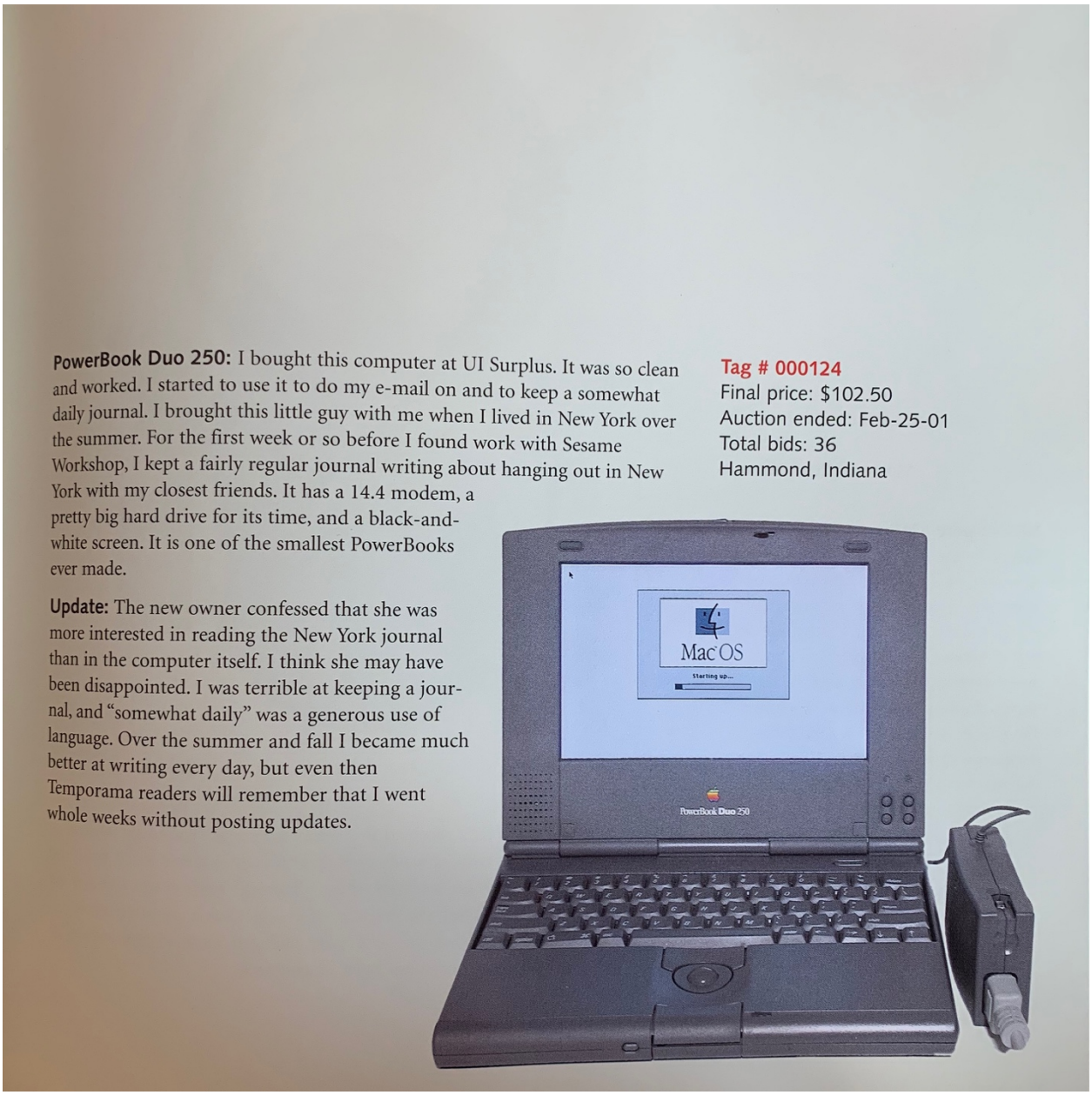


Figure 11. John D. Freyer, 'PowerBook Duo 250,' *All My Life for Sale*, 2001, pp. 91.

Sarah's Christmas Gift: Sarah is my half sister. I never really got the distinction between half, step, and whole as far as siblings go. She is the daughter of my stepmother and my father, and she's as whole a sister as I can imagine. Are half sisters easier to baby-sit, or change the diaper of? Sarah is now a teenager, which makes me feel really old. Thank God that my brother, Paul, and I have given her mother such good on-the-job training for dealing with teenagers; I'm sure she now knows all the ways that kids can sneak out of the house at night. (Sarah, if you want to make sure you can get back in after sneaking out, leave the side door on the garage unlocked, but make sure you leave a clear path so that they don't hear you fumbling through the garage. If you get caught just tell them you were working on your bicycle. I think that worked for me once. Oh, and Sarah, you better be the highest bidder, because I think you will actually like your gift from me this year.)

Update: This was the top seller of my family's Christmas gifts last year. After Christmas the eBayers, who were in a bidding war with my stepmother, wanted to know what it was they had been bidding on. Sadly, most of the gifts I gave to my family that year were T-shirts I'd made picturing the items that I was selling on allmylifeforsale. Sarah received a shirt with my ice cube tray printed on the front. Ironically, she gave me ice cube trays for Christmas to replace the ones I sold.

Tag # 000904
Final price: $26.07
Auction ended: Dec-24-00
Total bids: 11
Saratoga Springs, New York

Figure 12. John D. Freyer, Sarah's Christmas Gift,' *All My Life for Sale*, 2001, pp.15.

John Freyer's Birthday Party: My birthday is on December 31, and every year I am reminded by my father that I was the best gift he received in 1972. He was able to claim me as a dependent for all of 1972 even though I was only alive for two hours. Normally, I spend New Year's somewhere in New York City, with Trey and Bekah, but this year I am spending it in Iowa City at the Motley Cow Café. Since I will not be in New York City on my birthday, my friend Maya is throwing me a birthday party at Recess in downtown New York on Thursday, December 28, at eight-thirty. This item is an opportunity to be "John Freyer" at my birthday party, which I will attend as well. The highest bidder will receive all the free drinks that people might buy me as well as any gifts and cards. Recess is on Spring Street between Greenwich and Renwick (the old Bell Café); you can get there by taking the C/E to Spring Street, and then walking west.

Update: I wasn't sure what would happen when I met the high bidder from this auction. It closed three hours before the party, and I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to contact the high bidder until after the party was over. Brian returned my e-mail almost instantaneously, and I invited him to dinner at Maya's house. When he showed up he said he was relieved that he could hear a crowd of people in Maya's apartment. While he was on the subway to Maya's he imagined approaching a silent, poorly lit door. I introduced him to my friends at dinner and showed him a stack of photographs of all of my friends who would be at the party at the bar around the corner. He memorized their names and faces and greeted my friends by name when they walked in the door. At some point in the evening I brought out a birthday cake and we all sang "Happy Birthday" to "John". A few weeks later I received a message from one of my friends saying that they were hanging out with "John Freyer 2". Brian is now friends with a good number of my friends in New York. I think they might have thrown him a birthday party at Recess this year.

Tag # 000727
Final price: $1.25
Auction ended: Dec-28-00
Total bids: 2
New York, New York

Figure 13. John D. Freyer, 'John Freyer's Birthday Party,' *All My Life for Sale*, 2001, pp. 35.

Update: Jenn and her daughter Paine were the first to send me an update on an item that I sold. They sent me a photograph of my salt shaker on the shelf above their stove and told me that they were regularly using my HyVee salt. At the end of the update they invited me to visit. I suddenly realized that a community might be forming around the objects that I was shipping around the country. I decided to take them up on their offer and soon started to inform the high bidders on my other objects that I might want to visit them too. I stopped by Jenn and Paine's house on September 3, 2001.

Figure 14. John D. Freyer, 'Salt Shaker and Salt,' *All My Life for Sale*, 2001, pp. 21.

Figure 15. Michael Landy, *Break Down* (Oxford St. Exterior View), 2001.

Figure 16. Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001.

Figure 17. Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001.

Figure 18. Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001.

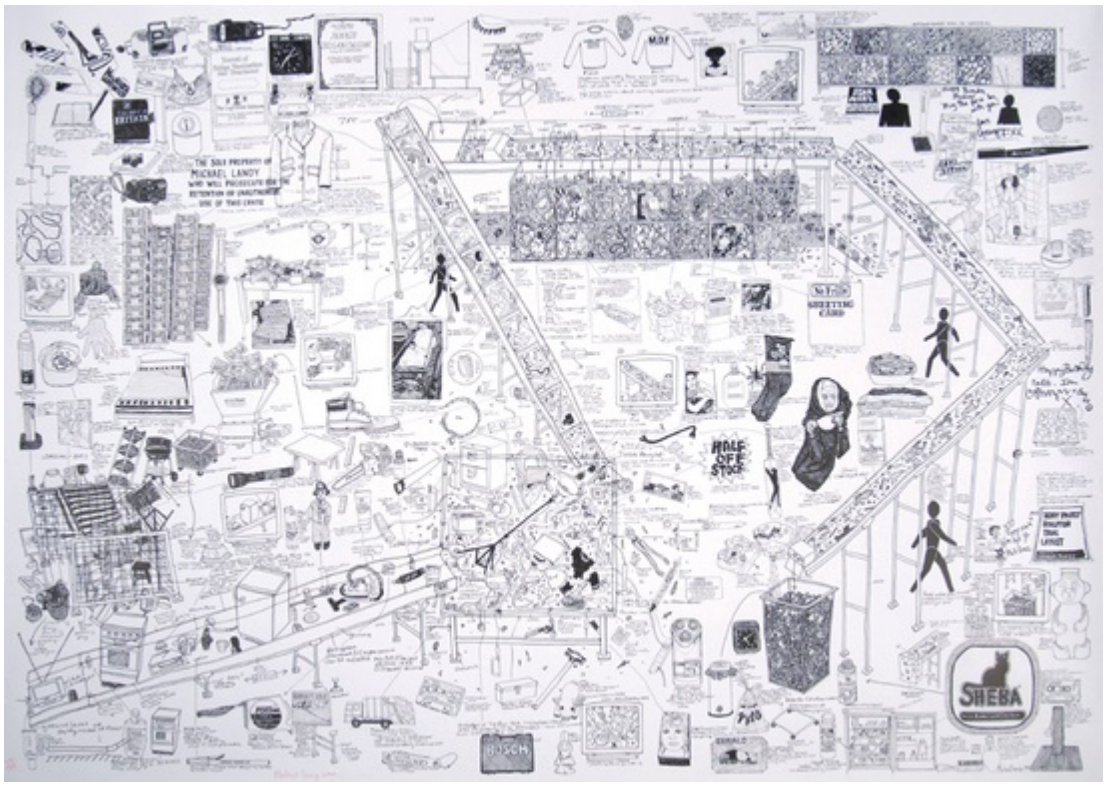


Figure 19. Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001.

Figure 20. Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001.

Figure 21. Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001.

Figure 22. Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001.

Figure 23. Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001.

Figure 24. Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001.

Figure 25. Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001.

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